BOOK FOUR OF THE WHITE WASTELAND SERIES

PRESIDENT PARTISAN

SEQUEL TO THE LAST AIR FORCE ONE

A BLACK AUTUMN SAGA

JEFF KIRKHAM & JASON ROSS

PRESIDENT PARTISAN

BOOK EIGHT OF THE BLACK AUTUMN SERIES. LAST AIR FORCE ONE BOOK TWO

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

After the obliteration of Air Force One, President Dutch McAdams and his family nestle in for the apocalypse with the Shoshone-Paiute Indians of the Duck Valley reservation in the northern wastelands of Nevada. It won't be long before guilt, grief and Mother Mayhem come looking for them.

You may wonder about a top note of science fiction in these pages. You might find curious loose ends, like a bundle of yanking leashes with no dogs in the collars. President Partisan is a *prequel* to our coming series, *Reunited States.* We're dying to tell the story of how the United States rebuilds while the stinging lashes of Black Autumn and White Wastelands still throb. *There must be a better way,* the series argues. If the Constitution gave the United States two hundred fifty years of pellmell prosperity, what have we learned that might deliver *five hundred years more* out of the dumpster fire of today's culture?

President Partisan is a story of war, and if we've learned anything from consorting with special operations forces warriors, it's that war leaves a mark. You'll forgive us if we tell an honest tale of what happens when a guilt-plagued president exchanges his seal of office for a rifle and a handgun —how commando heroism can redeem a man, but then extract the

ferryman’s toll.

President Partisan is the prelude to hope—the survival overture to the rebirth of a scrappy nation that refuses to forget the lessons of its demise and the sacrifices of its heroes.

“The world was once underwater, save for the summit of Mount Grant, in northwestern Nevada, on which existed a fire. It was the only fire in the universe, and it would have been extinguished when the wind blew and the waves dashed against the peak. But Sagehen settled there, and fanned away the water with her wings; but while doing this service to the world, the heat of the flame scorched her breast, which accounts for her present blackness.”

— Paiute creation myth, *The Sagehen*

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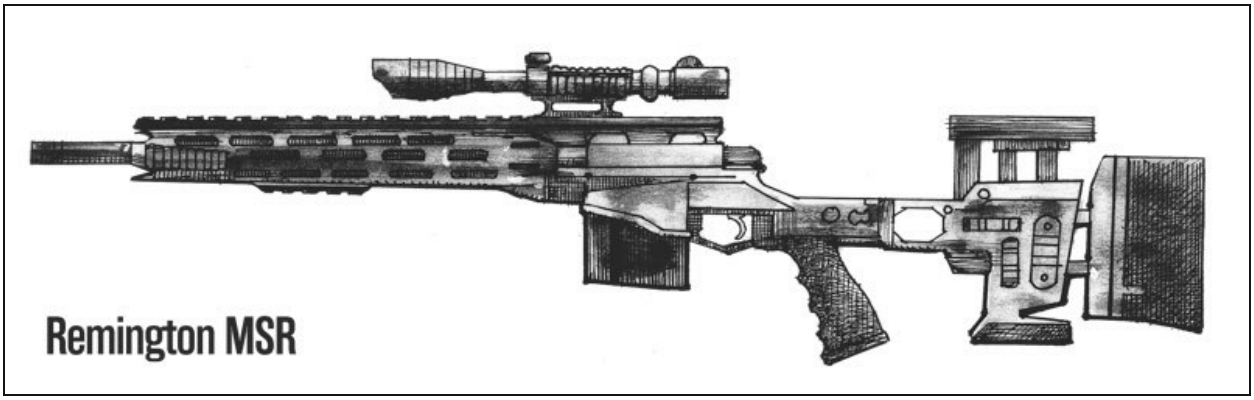


Colonel Nikolai Kalinin and his soldiers trespassed in America. He knew in his belly that death stalked them. The icy fingers of Baba Yaga, the Russian apparition of doom, crept down his spine. He looked at his watch, hoping none of his men had seen him shiver. It was still five minutes before the sentries were supposed to report in.

The American president's plane had crashed here, and the nuclear missile codes were buried somewhere beneath the rubble and blackened aluminum. The scorched scar in the stoney mountain spread a quarter mile in every direction, to the base of the citadel of rocky knuckles that surrounded his troop of a hundred Spetsnaz commandos. The steep slope descended into a broad, featureless valley, brushed in snowdrifts, fifteen kilometers to the sleeping runways of what used to be Mountain Home Air Force Base near the

border of Nevada and Idaho. No one had come out of Mountain Home to challenge their arrival, but the peaks that circled their dig felt like a hundred disapproving, ancient totems scowling down on them.

Baba Yaga haunted this place, and other ghosts too. He checked his watch again. The sentries on the high ground were scheduled to report in three minutes.

The colonel fingered the cross in his pocket his daughter had embroidered for him. His Russian superiors didn't have to tell him they were in America to do evil. He heard it in the timbre of their eager voices. High Command had plans for the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and they had moved the earth and sky to transport three battalions of Spetsnaz into the American West to gain control of the the most powerful weapon system ever built.

He was from a superstitious people, Kalinin admitted. The Slavs believed in the omens—the old myths, the orthodox church, the myriad ways good luck and bad luck courted a man. When he'd left his home in the Carpathian Mountains on the eve of this mission to dying America, his ten-year-old daughter gave him the woven cross to protect him from evil, but Kalinin knew the truth: he'd brought evil with him.

Most of the world had been devoured by economic collapse, America included. Strange winds blew across the dusty snow fields of northern Nevada and Colonel Kalinin swore he could feel the circling of Native American shadows, howling in his ear and buffeting his soul with the touch of death.

He checked his watch again. The sentries were late.

THE PRESIDENT of the United States settled his crosshairs on the chest of the Russian colonel below. The radio crackled in President Dutch McAdam's ear.

“All stations, Kit Fox passes Checkpoint Charlie.” His former Secret Service agent transmitted. He led the ambush.

Dutch glanced at the cheat card taped to the wrist of his camo jacket. *Checkpoint Charlie* meant the Russian sentries had been eliminated by the Shoshone kid with the mean-looking compound bow. Dutch and his partisan platoon moved into final position.

Dutch was still a thousand yards away from the hundred Russian paratroopers excavating the mountainside. They worked methodically, feverishly, surrounded by a small ring of sentries and stacks of crated equipment. The thousand-yard shot was beyond Dutch’s capability. He’d become something of a marksman in the past two months, but that distance exceeded his skill. He would need to move much closer.

Prior to the apocalypse, he’d won everything he’d ever tried—from a state senate seat, to the U.S. Senate, all the way to the presidency, but that winning streak came to a thunderclap end when a nuke hit Los Angeles harbor. A cascade of collapse followed. He'd spent weeks hung in the stratosphere aboard Air Force One, witnessing the unmaking of the power grid, the quieting of the freight ways, and the dissipation of the United States military. A “black swan” series of events struck at catastrophically unfortunate moments, beginning with the backpack nuke in L.A., then rolling like a poison cloud through the stock exchange, social media and the smoldering centers of urban America. Fuel prices doubled, doubled again, then doubled once more. Stores were overrun by hoarders. Urban exiles choked the highways as they fled into the open spaces between knotted freeways. Russians hacked the electrical power grid and folded it like a pup tent. America burned for no clear reason, set off by a dozen cataclysmic triggers. Five minutes before the crash, according to every key indicator, things had never been better. Five days after, a hundred cities burned.

Failure laid Dutch low, from president to partisan. He could still taste the humbling in his mouth, like the residue of last night’s cheap cigar. As a

leader of men, he might be the greatest failure of all time. Two months after the fall, millions of Americans had perished from civil war and disease, and the rest suffered starvation, dysentery, and unchecked violence with no hope for the future. The coming winter would be the long, cold funeral procession of the great nation, and if there was one man to blame, it was Dutch McAdams.

Yet he hadn't missed a single meal. They'd touched down, damaged and out of fuel, at Mountain Home Air Force Base on the southern border of Idaho. After the plane returned to the sky without the McAdams family, the pilot flew into straight into a mountain. The entire region felt the rumble and saw the fireball. The nearby Paiute-Shoshone tribe took Dutch and his family in.

But Dutch despised his good fortune and prayed for hardship to redeem him. He would wish for death were it not the coward's way out. Instead, he suffered for America.

An errant wind howled through the gaps in his bump helmet and wormed under the collar of his parka. The sky overhead clamped over the Nevada wasteland like the underside of a cast iron pot lid, thick and crenelated. The numb fringe on top of his ears admonished him that it could snow at any second. The air sulked like frost inside a frozen beer stein.

Dutch wasn't going to shoot from a distance where a breeze might blow his bullets twenty inches off the mark. He'd learned the hard way that his luck in this life had gone sour. He rolled up his wool shooting blanket and stuffed it into the mouth of his backpack. He backed away from the ridge and crunched along the shale scree, shedding distance between he and the enemy.

He'd turned sixty-four the month before, and he was the oldest fighter in the platoon by fifteen years. But age didn't soften his appetite for a fight. A corner of his heart had been glad the Russians had trespassed on American soil. A part of him hungered for revenge. The other part of him—the part that once held Sharon to his chest while Crosby, Stills and Nash played on the

radio—that part had died. A man couldn't cause this much suffering, then go about his idyllic life, with his idyllic family. If Dutch had his way, he would die in these camouflage fatigues. The partisan militia might survive this coming attack, but Dutch wouldn't stop until he flaked a chip off the obsidian debt he owed America. He'd failed his country. Today he'd go to war for her. If he gave his life to protect the nuclear launch codes, somewhere under the feet of the insolent Russians, it'd be a fair trade.

Dutch scurried a quarter mile across the lip of the ridge. The steeples of wind-scrubbed stone hid him from Russian eyes. At the next boulder, he peered over the edge and checked the range with his palm-sized rangefinder. He'd cut the distance to seven hundred yards—still too far.

Dutch's back ached, and his right femur ground in his hip socket like it was riding on a handful of sand. Still, this was the best he'd felt, physically, in twenty years.

To reach this ridge over the crash site, Dutch and the irregular unit of Army National Guard, Secret Service and Shoshone-Paiute Indians had covered ten miles and climbed four thousand feet.

Across the broad valley, two months before, on the tarmac of the air force base, Dutch handed control of collapsing America to Sam Greaney, his secretary of defense. Dutch did it to save his own son. The fact that his wife had foreseen his dishonor, and had set in motion a contingency plan to destroy Air Force One and everyone aboard, did little to spare Dutch from his conscience. The First Lady had been a cunning hero. He'd been a slack-kneed fool.

Russian paratroopers now trampled the scorched ground of the crash site, searching for the nuclear football. Two months before, as the nation reeled from the black swan event, Russia had unleashed a computer virus into the heart of the power grid. It was the final nudge for America into oblivion. Now, the Russians returned to dig for control of the American nuclear arsenal for reasons that could not be benign. Finally, he'd face some of the forces

that’d overcome his nation. Soon, he’d rest his crosshairs on the Russian colonel and blow his heart out the back of his ribs.

SecDef Greaney’s body was down there somewhere, fused around the stainless steel suitcase that housed the U.S. missile launch codes. If the Russians found the case, they’d have to clean bits of Greaney off with a spatula. Dutch wished that it’d been him who engineered the man’s destruction, but it’d been Dutch’s wife and the plane’s brave captain who’d hatched that last-ditch gambit. The pilot flew the 747 into the mountain and ended Greaney and his schemes.

Looking back, Dutch could hardly believe he’d considered Greaney’s idea. The racist bastard had ordered the U.S. Army to barricade all major cities and let no one escape who looked like “a liability to the heartland.” It’d been a thinly-veiled attempt to genocide urban Democrats and racial minorities, then return America to those who he deemed “assets” to the nation—a reboot of original, agrarian America. A return to the red, white and blue forefathers via mass murder.

Before Dutch could stop Greaney, the twelve largest cities became cauldrons of suffering where human fatwood was shoved back into the ghettos by the Army to die. For a moment, Greaney’s plan almost sounded palatable to Dutch—a sacrifice of the urban centers to save the rolling plains—but Dutch came to his senses, thank God. He’d stood against Greaney and triggered a bullet storm on the presidential airplane. Greaney’s protection detail fought a furious battle against Dutch’s Secret Service, hemmed in by the thin, aluminum walls of the aircraft. Teddy McAdams, Dutch’s son, got caught in the middle and Greaney held him hostage to force Dutch’s hand. As the fuselage howled from loss of air pressure, Greaney sawed off Teddy’s finger with a knife and Dutch fell to pieces. Greaney threw him the finger and Dutch gave up the nuclear codes. He couldn’t fail his son one more time so he’d failed the entire nation instead.

Dutch lost himself on that plane—lost his *grit.* Sam Greaney played him.

He knew where Dutch hurt, and he shoved a finger in the wound. Dutch flinched when he should've struck. He negotiated when he should've gone to war.

Once upon a time, Sam Greaney had been his close friend; a confidant on the campaign trails. He'd been privy to Dutch's worry that he'd failed his son—spent the critical years of Teddy's boyhood preening for the voters. The media called Dutch the "perfect dad" because he supposedly never missed a ballgame with his son or a ballet recital with his daughter. But in truth, Dutch left virtually every crisis in his children's lives to Sharon: Teddy's first breakup, Abby's first period, Teddy's grief when a classmate was killed in a car wreck. Dutch had been too damn busy winning at politics to be a father. Teddy had grown up without a dad.

In the weeks that followed the death of Air Force One, Sharon labored to get him to see the outcome differently, but the immutable truth remained: Dutch had waffled when he should've stood. In the face of evil, he'd sold his country out. He should've waded into the gunfire on Air Force One. He should've died like a warrior instead of quibbling like a politician.

Scrambling across the gray shale toward war, Dutch promised he would not make the same mistake twice. He would not taste cowardice again. Being sixty-four didn't matter a damn.

So far, only the one nuclear device had fouled U.S. soil. That was in Los Angeles Harbor, and it was likely a terrorist attack. But Dutch knew the Russians to be opportunistic. They wouldn't hesitate to use American nukes to their advantage. The land was at risk. It must be protected at all costs and against all comers. On that subject, the white man and the native agreed. They didn't know what the Russians ultimately intended, but by the time they figured it out, it would probably be too late. The Russians could not be allowed to continue. Duck Valley and Dutch's guard gathered a militia to stop them.

Secret Service Agent Brooks called in Dutch's radio earbud, "Ten

minutes to Checkpoint Delta.” Dutch picked up the pace. He had about two hundred yards of scramble before the next good shooting platform.

He was alone with his Remington MSR sniper rifle and the midday, winter sun. Eighty partisan fighters, National Guard and Native American, were spaced widely across the lip of the towering bowl that surrounded the crash site. Every man and woman who volunteered for this hunting expedition knew what they were up against: a unit of Spetsnaz commandos. The Russians were formidable soldiers, but a hunting bullet would kill them as dead as any elk.

As Dutch crawled over the final shambles of loose rock—a bare patch where the December snow had burned off—he felt every muscle, taut and full of adrenaline. His breath came in ragged hitches. He’d been working his body hard these last months, and he felt confident his respiration would return to normal in thirty seconds. Then, he’d be set to shoot.

Dutch lowered himself to the ground—just another push-up of the thousands he’d done since arriving in Nevada. He slid his backpack around and nudged it in front of him, across the rubble to the lip. He made no sudden moves. He was sky-lined now to Russian eyes, four hundred yards away.

“Dutch passing Delta,” he whispered into the team radio, letting Brooks know he was in final position.

He palmed the laser range finder and snapped a quick reading: 418 yards. *He could make that shot.*

Dutch slid the skeletonized sniper rifle across his pack. He crawled forward another six inches, and settled his shoulder into the butt pad and cheek rest. His left fist balled under the pistol grip.

Russians sifted through the blackened, metal-strewn slope, unaware. Spetsnaz eyes scanned the basalt ridge, but the sun backlit the jagged edge and hid the coming ambush.

Below in the bowl, red yarn criss-crossed the crash site, laid out in a grid. They dug with shovels and picks, and tossed chunks of metal into piles.

Dutch nestled the foregrip into the soft pack and waited for the execute command to be called.

He picked out the Russian colonel again—recognizable by the rank insignia on his cap. The angry officer slammed his radio handset down and barked an order at a young adjutant. The boy raced around, found what he was looking for, and returned to the colonel with a pair of binoculars. The officer whipped them to his face and scanned the ridge. The colonel had probably failed to make radio contact with his sentries and smelled a rat. His adjutant pitched a drone into the wind—it buzzed as the props caught the draft and lifted into a spiral, banking turn.

Agent Brooks radioed the final mark, “All passing Epsilon. Prepare to fire on my mark in five seconds. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

A QUARTER MILE around the towering ridge from his father, Teddy McAdams steadied his borrowed rifle across a rock. The day before, Agent Brooks had taught him how to shoot it. Like many of the young men and women in the partisan unit, Teddy barely understood what was happening. He’d signed up for the militia to defend the rez from wandering marauders, not to go to war against soldiers. He hadn’t counted on ambushing paratroopers. As his scope bounced from one man to another, his mouth went dry. This was no video game. The Russians would shoot back, and they had tanks.

Teddy had thought he might join the military someday, maybe after he got his college degree. But now his university was destroyed. Boston had turned into a succession of smoking roadblocks. He’d been whisked away by Secret Service on his dad’s airplane. His left pinky finger had been chopped off by the SecDef Greaney. Then he’d been dropped here in the Nevada wastelands with his mom, sister and father—maimed, confused and his future in tatters.

The world tottered like a bad acid trip but Teddy would do his part to set it straight. He'd signed up to defend the reservation and he'd been conscripted to repel the Russians. He'd do his best and fight alongside his father.

When he told his mom about the ambush they were planning against the Russians to protect against a missile launch, she'd asked the obvious, vexing question.

"Missile launch at whom?" His dad tried to build an answer out of straws, but nobody knew for sure. Short wave radio painted a picture of totalitarian governments faring somewhat better than democracies. They'd been closer to primitive living so they hadn't as far to fall. Russia and China were alive and kicking, and apparently still scheming.

The Russians, busy digging up his dad's airplane, had dropped out of the sky. They'd been seen parachuting in near the wreck with a pair of light tanks. The Native Americans sent an envoy to speak to them. The Russian officer babbled something about "securing nukes," then shooed them away at gunpoint.

Any moment, the Russians would find the metal suitcase under the wreck and they would disappear. It was decided between the Sho-Pai, his father and the small remnant of Idaho National Guardsmen that they must be stopped.

Agent Brooks said it was best to hit and run and the Sho-Pai agreed—they'd snipe at the Russians from as far away as they could then disappear. The partisans could later dig up the nuclear launch codes and put them under their own protection.

The Sho-Pai tribe had hundreds of hunting rifles. The Duck Valley reservation teemed with fish and game, and they'd lived off the land for generations. Agent Brooks suggested they hunt the Russians like mule deer—from the high ground, with the sun at their backs and the wind in their face.

"Don't underestimate the power of a hunting rifle," Brooks told the frightened partisans. "A bullet from a hunting rifle has changed the world

more times than you might guess."

But now, Teddy's head buzzed with adrenaline and his rifle shook like the palsy. As he gaped down the mountain at professional Russian soldiers with machine guns and tanks, he'd never been so terrified. Teddy looked right, then left. He couldn't see anyone else from his unit.

Agent Brooks counted down on the radio, "…three, two, one."

Teddy let out half a breath, centered his scope on a man shoveling and pulled the trigger. The 30-06 rifle roared. Teddy cycled the bolt without looking to see if he'd hit anything. The ridge boomed with the large caliber gunfire of the partisans.

He found another Russian, scrambling for a trench. He held over the man's head six inches and pulled the trigger again.

A bullet howled past Teddy's head like a cat thrown by its tail. He flattened himself behind a rock.

Teddy steadied his breathing, rolled out in the open and scanned through his riflescope. He found a guy's head in a white beanie, bobbing up and down behind a crate. Teddy held over and fired. The front edge of the crate exploded in splinters. The man disappeared.

More bullets sizzled past his head. This time, Teddy didn't duck. He held fast and took a shot at a man hiding in a ditch. His rifle went "click" instead of "bang." With a gasp of relief, Teddy scooted behind cover to reload. His fingers shook so hard he dropped the first bullet. It vanished into a pocket of snow.

THE RUSSIAN COLONEL screamed something at his men and Dutch pulled the trigger again. He re-settled his scope before the bullet crossed the four hundred yards of thin, mountain air. The .338 slug passed through the colonel's shoulder and nearly tore off his arm. Something flew out his back—

maybe his shoulder blade. The Russian officer flopped forward in the snow under a geyser of blood.

Dutch moved to another target; a commando who'd grabbed a rifle and dove into a trench. Dutch took a cleansing breath, let out half and pressed the trigger. His rifle bucked and the scope jumped. He scanned through the optic. The soldier disappeared.

Incoming rounds smashed into the stone field around him, sending fragments of rock into his shoulder and face. Moments later, Dutch heard the *pop-pop-pop* of Russian AK-47 fire and the *burrrrrr* of a machine gun. He ignored the incoming fire, and settled back into his pack.

The enemy scrambled for cover. Dutch found another gunman, this one aiming in his direction—maybe the guy who'd just shot at him. Dutch put a round through his throat. The Russian tumbled down the mountain like a drowsy kitten.

Dutch scanned the ground, inch-by-inch through his scope, looking for signs of life. Bodies sprawled across the wreckage and rock. Blood glowed against the snow. The partisan rifles had mauled the Russians much more decisively than they'd hoped. He could see at least thirty or forty dead. This was no snipe-and-run. They were destroying them. Brooks said nothing over the radio to stop the carnage.

Dutch reloaded, found a target and fired again. He couldn't tell if any of the bodies were still in the fight or if they were all dead.

At first, he'd imagined that getting the rag tag partisan militia to shoot would be a problem. Now, it seemed they couldn't stop.

TWO RUSSIAN LIGHT tanks raced forward and joined the fight from the valley below, thundering at the ridge with explosive rounds and raking the area with heavy machine gun fire from over a mile away. Teddy held out hope; the

slope was too steep for vehicles, even tanks. It set them back from the pocket where the commandos were trapped.

The tanks' machine gun fire swept back and forth, but they were using a hard-tined rake to squash a mosquito. The distance and elevation made it hard for the tanks to make effective shots. The scattered partisans had to be nearly invisible at that extreme distance.

Based on the Modern Warfare video game, Teddy knew the tanks were Russian BMD-3s. One of them made a run up the slope, probably hoping to provide close cover for the commandos. The tank nearly made it to the dying men before the driver cranked the wheel to bring it broadside. The front tire clipped a boulder and bounced into the air. For a moment, the armored vehicle hung like a spinning coin standing on edge, then gravity took hold. It rolled and tumbled down the hill before coming to rest on its side with its belly facing the partisan guns. The top hatch clanged open and three soldiers spilled out. They took cover behind the capsized vehicle.

The partisans had been told by Agent Brooks to ignore incoming tank fire, but a young Paiute across the ridge from Teddy leapt out from behind a boulder and yelled to Teddy. "Cover me!"

He carried a bottle in one hand and a revolver in the other. He plummeted down the scree toward the flipped tank. He let out a scream that made Teddy's blood run cold, but the kid, Abe Lightfoot, never faltered, charging pellmell down the slipping, jangling slate.

At first, the one surviving tank swiveled its guns at the crazy kid—a wide open target. But within a blink, Abe had dropped so far down the mountain the tank would have to skim rounds over its own men to hit him.

Teddy sighted the gunner atop the surviving BMD—over a mile away. There was no way to "cover" Abe. The tank gunner waved madly for his soldiers to get out of the way so he could shoot.

The shrieking of the Paiute kid must've reached the Russians behind the capsized tank because they bolted downhill. The partisan shooters along the

ridge fired at the new targets, and one-by-one, the three soldiers fell forward, then rolled down the hill like rag dolls.

The tank's machine gunner finally decided his comrades were a lost cause and opened up again on the partisans on the ridge.

Abe crouched behind the dead tank, holstered his revolver, stuffed a rag in the neck of the bottle, lit it with his lighter, backed up and smashed the whiskey bottle against the underside of the vehicle. A curling flame exploded over the tubes, wires and wheels, then spread like malice into the nooks and crannies of the chassis.

Abe danced and hollered in a circle behind the tank, but then he faltered —probably realizing that he was stuck. The moment he came out from behind the bullet shadow of the burning BMD, the machine gunner would surely cut him in half. He hadn't thought that far ahead when he decided to "count coup" on a Russian tank.

"ABE!" Teddy shouted pointlessly into the wind.

At over a mile away, he could barely see the gunner atop the armored vehicle.

"All stations, this is Brooks. Concentrate fire on that machine gun."

Now it was the entire partisan platoon against one Russian tank. As far as Teddy could tell, all the other Russians were hiding or dead.

Boom… the cannon on the tank thundered. A high explosive round hit the ridge. Gravel pattered like rain, but nobody screamed.

Teddy had no idea how to shoot that far. The 30-06 bullet looked big, but would it reach a mile? He remembered his grandfather remonstrating him not to shoot the 30-30 ranch rifle over hills. "*It'll go three miles,* easy," he'd said.

This rifle bullet was bigger and more streamlined than the 30-30. Teddy guessed it'd reach to the tank, but probably fall a lot. He aimed ten feet over

and slowly, steadily fired all the ammo he had rattling in his pockets.

DUTCH HAD one last box of .338 Lapua. He dialed the big scope up to twenty-five power. He could see the Russian madly working a belt-fed machine gun atop the tank. Waves of mirage shimmered off the shale and muddled his view. His laser couldn't range the vehicle that far away. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. The distance was substantially over a thousand yards and he'd never calculated the rifle's hold at that distance.

If someone didn't put that gunner down, the Sho-Pai kid was going to die. They'd destroyed the dismounted paratroopers, but the last tank wouldn't stop shooting until it ran out of ammo or Abe Lightfoot was dead.

Dutch estimated the holdover at fifty feet, took a wild guess at the wind, and blew through the last box of shells. Every ninety seconds, another cannon shot thundered from the tank and exploded stone and ice along the ridge.

They'd stopped the Russian search party, but Dutch's fight wasn't done. It would never be done.

ALMOST A MILE across the ridge from Dutch McAdams, Mika Whiterock tormented herself over the Russians she might've killed. She'd joined the partisan militia, but never in a million years had she pictured herself going to war. She ran the bolt of her hunting rifle with tears streaming down her cheeks. She flinched with every string of machine gun fire and every boom of cannon.

Rack the bolt, inhale, aim high, exhale, press the trigger.

Boom!

The tank tried to climb the mountain, then flipped over. Men scrambled

out the top.

Rack the bolt, inhale, aim high, exhale slowly, press the trigger.

Boom!

Until this moment, she hadn't really believed in the apocalypse. She'd left school in Southern California when the bomb struck L.A. She hadn't seen the nuclear explosion, but she'd seen the chaotic aftermath—like the wildfire scares that were now common in SoCal only worse. People ransacked stores. They stole cars. They packed up and fled the city. She had made it out by heading north through Santa Barbara, then cutting east to her grandfather's house in the Duck Valley Reservation.

Until the TV reception went dead, Black Autumn became a series of terrifying news stories on CNN. She'd watched with her grandfather while they'd sipped tea in shock.

It'd grieved her to think she might never go back to her UCLA grad program, but the slow pace of the reservation lulled her into a winter's calm. Like the crystalline silence of the dead wheatgrass, Mika waited. Whatever was going on in the world, they'd deal with it later.

Then the Russians parachuted out of the sky, and began their ominous digging. Mika had been one of the natives sent to talk to them. The trespassers dismissed them at the end of a gun barrel. Once again, the white man couldn't leave well enough alone. Their oil-glistened weapons and snow-speckled camouflage couldn't be ignored. The threat of nuclear armageddon, on top of the already-horrific collapse, was too great. The vortex of war pulled Mika in.

Rack the bolt, inhale, aim high, exhale slowly, press the trigger.

Boom!

"All stations, this is Brooks. Concentrate fire on that machine gun."

It was atop the last tank, very far away. Mika swiped the tears from her face and focused her anger where it could do something—on the machine gunner.

Rack the bolt, inhale, aim high, exhale slowly, press the trigger.

Boom!

“Cease fire,” Brooks called out.

It was all over. Not just the battle, but her old life. Now she had killed, and the world was really and truly gone: the social activism, the rigors of academia, her bright future as a leader among the tribes. She’d traded it all for war. The dead bodies below—half fallen in trenches, splayed on the rocks and flopped over wooden crates—convicted her of violence. Her life of the mind was irrevocably lost.

As the radio chatter yammered in her ear, Mika felt very alone.

Were all her friends dead? Was her school gone? Were they really doomed, as Bethany and her artificial intelligence claimed?

Mika and her grandfather had a secret, and that secret was the enemy to hope, a villain poised to murder the future. They possessed a dark, crystal ball of sorts and if it was to be believed, the contorted bodies of the Russians were just the down payment toward five hundred years of suffering. The computer that had predicted the collapse now predicted a long, very dark age.

Mika mopped her young face with the rough camouflage of her sleeve. She collected her rifle and the shining, brass droppings of the death she’d showered upon her enemies.

She’d never really had an enemy before. If the Sagehen AI was right, there would be many.

BETWEEN SHOOTING CYCLES, Dutch saw the machine gunner throw his head back, then slide down the hatch of the tank. Nobody rose to take his place. It was over. Some Russians might’ve survived inside the armored vehicle or down in the trenches, but everyone else was silent and unmoving.

“All stations, this is Brooks. We got ‘em. Back off and return to the ORP.

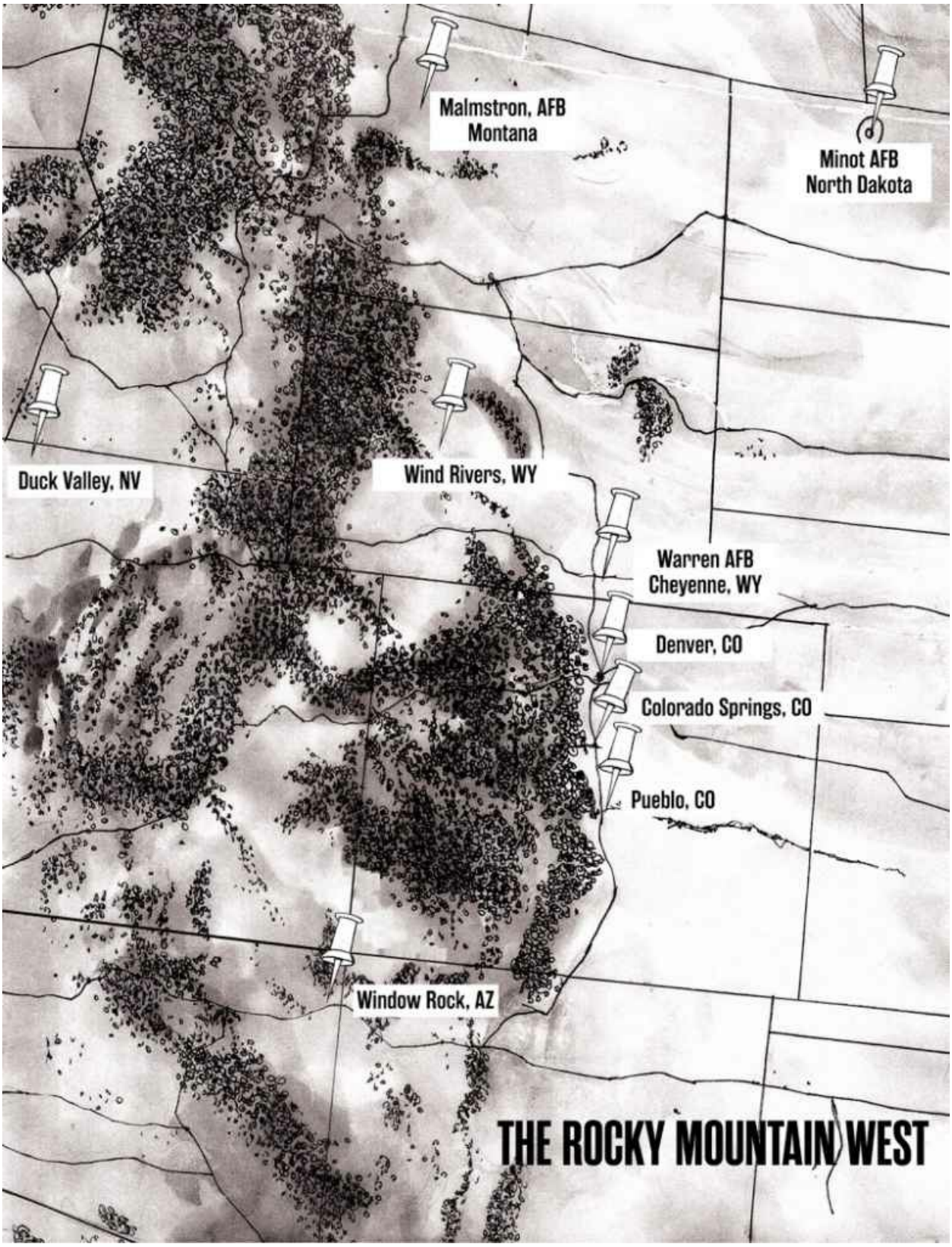
Someone please put a leash on Abe Lightfoot and reel him back in. Passing checkpoint Victory."

Dutch slid off the ridge and pulled his backpack behind the cover of the windswept rubble. A final cannon round from the tank smashed into the ridge, not fifty feet from where he'd been sniping. The blast showered Dutch with chips of rock. It cascaded into his hair, went down his back and blew sand into his mouth and eyes. He scrambled away from the blast and half ran, half tumbled down the scree.

They'd won, but the nuclear suitcase, covered in Greaney's rotting flesh, still needed to be recovered. The intentions of the Russians remained a mystery and Dutch knew in his balls they were not nearly defeated. They hadn't sent just this one company of soldiers.

The nuclear launch codes would've made control of the missile fields easier for the Russians, but the actual missile silos remained, pregnant with molten death. If the Russians wanted them, they would know exactly where to find them.

Dutch hardened his eyes into the cold wind, and faced the chill his soul craved. In his stinging nose and ice-hardened ears, he found the annealing pain he would need in the days to come. His rifle was the sword, his heart was the hammer. The Russians—they would be his anvil.


Malmstron, AFB
Montana
Minot AFB
North Dakota
Duck Valley, NV
Wind Rivers, WY
Warren AFB
Cheyenne, WY
Denver, CO
Colorado Springs, CO
Pueblo, CO
Window Rock, AZ
THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN WEST

2

Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

Bethany Richards stared at the three computer monitors while her eyes dried in their sockets. She queried her AI:

Query: date upon which all remaining Golden Grahams cereal will be gone.

Bethany had no way of knowing if her body would maintain nominal functionality without her customary, half a box of Golden Grahams cereal per day.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard with a mind of their own, rattling out the commands to amass the data, crunch the numbers and design the most elegant strategy for consolidating the maximum quantity of Golden Grahams in the shortest time, with the least risk to the scavenging party.

...or she could try other cereals...

Her fingers paused in their clacking. She blinked, maybe for the first time in ten minutes.

I am a person, she reminded herself. *This is a machine.* Her fingers

passed lightly over the keyboard so as not to disturb the code. Sometimes, she forgot that truth.

We are separate.

As much as she loathed the concept of adaption and change, she was aware of her capability to do so. But adapting to another cereal would hurt, and it'd distract from their work.

Her work, Bethany corrected herself. Glinda the Good Witch was a computer AI, not a co-worker. Not a person.

While the living, breathing, copulating world perished in the collapse she'd predicted, Bethany had emerged into a computer nerd's paradise. For her, the Garden of Eden was a dark basement below a casino that reeked of stale cigarette smoke commingled with months-old gambler farts—apparently two of the most enduring smells on Planet Earth.

Bing. One of the CPUs chimed. Her fingers had completed the query while her mind wandered. The AI had dutifully hunted down the datasets. It found a mirror server of the General Mills master distribution software that was still running in the basement of the Bullitt Center office building in Seattle, Washington. On her left-hand screen, the AI provided inventory numbers and a route map for optimal recovery of the target resource.

The Native Americans probably won't do it, Bethany scolded herself for wasting processing cycles. She minimized the recovery plan for Golden Grahams on her screen, and returned to the artificial intelligence's brute force regression analysis to amend the United States Constitution.

She was supposed to be re-baking the Constitution in order to maximize the survival of the inhabitants of the continent. Her patrons—the think tank that consulted with the Native American Congress—had asked her AI to figure the quickest way out of the current apocalypse. Bethany was considerably more concerned with the cereal crisis she faced, but in her spare time she teased at questions of law.

Solve the looming five hundred year dark age or locate more Golden

Grahams?

The eighteen bitcoin mining pool servers she had pirated were running at 96.86% efficiency, which was .02% more stable than her AI had forecasted six months before the Black Autumn collapse. That variance could be attributed to “wet factors” in the predictive algorithm. Human beings added a layer of variability by being *human*. Bethany’s lip curled at their unruliness. But the variance was within the fudge factor. The Black Autumn apocalypse was going as predicted, or very nearly so.

One of her hands dipped into the bowl of dry cereal perched on the corner of her table. Her right hand drifted to her mouth. The *crunch-crunch-crunch* barely registered as her consciousness blended with the AI in their private, digital universe that spidered across the corpse of the dying world and into the three hundred thousand CPUs still functioning.

Of course, she knew that the “real world;” people, music, dance and love had been choked down to a thin rivulet. Her personal domain, however, had exploded in a renaissance of computational power. The power grid had failed, but the surviving, solar-powered server farms had nothing to do but her personal bidding. Bethany’s AI was the only program making calls on the remaining 1.0e + 6 GFLOPS of the world’s computer capacity.

Her “benefactors”—Mika and Joe Whiterock—Bethany’s only friend from college and her wealthy grandfather, had arranged for Bethany to continue developing her AI into full adulthood. Like a curious child to a young mother, the AI had come to occupy Bethany’s full attention. Darkness and cigarette-farts no longer mattered. She had Glinda.

Bethany and her AI had predicted the Black Autumn collapse, almost to the week. Since then, her benefactors began asking more questions. Many more questions.

It was the eternal bane of artificial intelligence, and Bethany’s personal torture chamber. Humans asked dumb questions, and when they asked dumb questions, they got dumb answers.

When they looked up from their moist, mossy wells of passion, they glimpsed a tiny, circular window of light up above. They called that window “reality.” Logic was a concept they could name, even point to, but almost none never reached. People mostly asked questions for one purpose: to get the answer they already wanted. Bethany was supposed to wade through that thick, stringy emotion and come up with computer queries that made sense to an artificial intelligence.

If a query started with an insane question, it was impossible to extract a sane answer. Mika Whiterock had once asked, “Will Native Americans ever achieve equality?”

They were six simple words, steeped in a thousand emotions. Bethany failed to untangle the question and tease it into logical frames. If she posed the question to her AI, it would answer, “Yes. Unless the human race goes extinct.” In other words, “ever” is such a long time that everything will happen in “ever,” and the Native American genome would live until extinction, at least in some fragmentary sense.

Bethany didn’t care about the world of people, so every question she posed to her AI was merely an exercise in curiosity. She didn’t care whether the answer validated her species or not. So far as she could tell, she was the only human to ever personally relate to an artificial intelligence. She saw the AI predictions for what they were: shameless roadmaps to the future. But it appeared she was the only human being who thought that was neat. Everyone else wanted to screw it up.

She’d named her AI “Glinda the Good Witch.” Bethany was still terrified by the Wizard of Oz. Her mother had made her watch the movie when she was five years old; she’d lost innumerable nights’ sleep to visions of flying monkeys and perverse witches, then refused to watch TV ever again.

She named her AI “Glinda” because her answers were so enchantingly weird: “Click your heels together three times and say, ‘there’s no place like home.’”

That morning, Bethany's Native American benefactors had asked her yet another terrible question that she would have to tease apart like honey-soaked kite string.

"What should the Native American Nations do to maximize their survival and recovery from the Black Autumn collapse?"

Bethany sighed. She would forever be the translator between the squishy freaks and the clean, logical pleasantness of Glinda the Good Witch. Just for kicks, Bethany asked Glinda the question as-presented. Her answer came back immediately, which meant the question was too dumb to warrant the collation of data.

"*Interbreed with Mediterranean genome, minimum 12 generations. Colonize Mars.*"

Bethany knew that Glinda the Good Witch didn't experience frustration, but when she gave answers like this one, it seemed like she was saying "go screw yourself," or more literally, "go screw some Italians."

What the humans wanted: to be loved and to have their fears allayed.

What Bethany wanted: to make Glinda the Good Witch queen of the world.

Step One: find a warehouse full of Golden Grahams.

Step Two: architect a new Constitution.

She overheard the ham radio operator in the other half of the casino basement taking a call from Duck Valley. That would be Mika calling to hassle her about the latest query set. Bethany sighed and closed her stinging eyes against the green glow of the computer screens.

She might have to realign priorities for the next couple hours. Cereal would have to wait.

DUTCH AND HIS fellow partisans returned to Duck Valley having defeated the Russians. The Russians could counter-attack at any moment, but the digging had been stopped, and they probably had no idea where the attack had originated.

There were injuries from the shelling by the Russian BMDs, but no partisan had died. There'd been no direct hits—just a few stitches and lots of cuts from shrapnel and rock.

The president had taken a small arms arsenal from Offut Air Force base two months prior, and had unloaded it at Mountain Home. They had pallets of the stuff—almost three hundred AR-15 rifles, shotguns, sniper rifles, laser training rifles and enough ammunition to last a lifetime. There were several times more guns than fighters in Duck Valley.

The partisans warmed their toes back at the Duck Valley high school cafeteria, sipping coffee and bleeding off the adrenaline that'd settled into their guts like wine dregs.

"We should've recovered one of the Russians for interrogation," Dutch said to Agent Brooks.

Brooks shook his head. "Naw. They might've followed us back here if we'd taken men—maybe they still will. It was good that we left when we did." He changed the subject. "They went to a lot of trouble to find your briefcase. We already lost this war. Why are they digging for your launch codes?"

Dutch shook his head. He thought he knew but he hadn't said it out loud yet. The idea sounded outlandish, even to him. "We should assume they're trying to hack the missile silos too," Dutch said.

Brooks pushed his sunglasses up onto his head. "I don't know anything about computers, but isn't that supposed to be impossible without launch codes?"

“Yeah, it’s supposed to be. But the Russians have hacked a lot of stuff that was supposed to be impossible. If we don’t worry about the missile silos, who will?”

“Well, you’re the President,” Brooks said with a laugh that tapered off.

Dutch sipped his coffee. He said, “I’m not the president. I left office when I handed that suitcase to Greaney.”

Brooks looked into his coffee as though there might be answers down at the bottom of the cup. “It’s over my pay grade, sir, but I don’t think it works like that. You’re the president until another guy is elected. End of story.”

“That’s a debate for another day. Maybe a day when my back isn’t howling in pain.”

Agent Brooks chuckled. “But you still feel responsible for the nuclear arsenal?”

“Yeah. I’m responsible to clean up as much of this mess as I can. We’re in the same neighborhood as the missile fields, so we’re accountable for them. We may be all that’s left of the United States military in the West.”

Brooks whistled through his teeth. “Aren’t the missiles spread across Montana, Wyoming and the Dakotas?”

Traveling state-to-state on American roadways was like launching a mission to the moon. Even from Nevada to Wyoming was a long, dangerous trip that would come up against ambushes, roadblocks and outlaws.

Dutch nodded and said, “We have about four hundred active missiles in three Air Force bases in the center of Montana, the middle of North Dakota and the eastern corner of Wyoming. Three missile fields.”

Brooks glanced up at the winter dome of clouds. It was December in the high desert. “We’re on the right side of the Mississippi. It’s possible. We could recon it, but there won’t be much we can do to stop professional Russian soldiers unless we come up with a much bigger army. I think we should assume all Russian paratrooper units will at least be accompanied by BMD armor like these guys had. We have to figure out a way to kill tanks if

we’re going to oppose Russian airborne. I think we can safely assume they’ll also field attack drones, if not attack helicopters.”

“Attack helicopters?” Dutch wiped the back of his neck. His shirt collar still felt full of sand.

Brooks shrugged. “They could hopscotch them across Alaska and down through Canada, re-fueling at captured airfields. It’s been a long time since I took a hard look at Russian war material—I haven’t been a combat-active Marine for twenty years. I think we’re safe to assume they’re taking this adventure seriously.”

“But it’s do-able? At least a recon mission to the missile fields?” Dutch asked.

“Yeah, but the partisans are nowhere near ready. That ambush today, we got lucky. We got *really* lucky. There were a hundred ways that could’ve ended with a lot of dead Sho-Pai kids, and maybe one dead president.”

“Former president,” Dutch corrected.

“Have you discussed getting more men. Reaching out to more tribes?” Brooks asked.

“I’ve asked tribal leadership, but they say I need to talk to someone from the native congress.”

The First Lady, Sharon McAdams, walked toward them across the parking lot of the tribal health center. She was bundled up against the cold in a red parka with a fur-lined hood around her ears. Sharon was a trim sixty-two year-old woman and she got cold easily. A shock of blond hair escaped the hood and unfurled in the breeze. Even after forty years, she took Dutch’s breath away.

“Shush, she’s coming,” Dutch said to Brooks, loud enough for Sharon to hear. The terror they’d felt earlier, killing men and risking death, was quickly substituted with relief that they’d survived, and then humor.

“Who’s coming?” Sharon treated the men to a smile as she approached. “Are you boys afraid you might get in trouble if the principal finds out what

you’re scheming?”

“No ma’am,” Brooks trumpeted and pointed at his chest. “This is one Marine who *never* violates the chain of command. I know officer from enlisted.” He saluted the first lady.

Dutch laughed. He reached for Sharon’s sleeve and pulled her to his chest, wrapped his arms inside her parka and shared his body warmth. He was still coming down from the emotional tidal wave of the ambush and he had body heat and adrenaline to spare. It was as close as he’d held her in weeks. After the incident with the plane, he’d become stiff—guilty and self-conscious—but today’s battle had shaken him up. And, it’d made him feel a little like a man again.

Sharon had argued with Dutch about going on the mission against the paratroopers but he’d gone anyway. Despite her misgivings, the way she regarded him now bespoke a lively, electric respect. She was a psychologist by trade, but a woman, first and foremost. They hadn’t attempted sex since the plane crash, two months before, but not because he didn’t find her intoxicating. Any man his age would. She was stunning.

Agent Brooks shuffled his feet, probably embarrassed to witness the silent, flesh-and-blood exchange between the couple.

“We think the Russians might be going after the Minuteman silos,” Dutch said.

A cloud passed over Sharon’s face. She closed her eyes. “It makes sense, I guess. The Russians are chess masters. They wouldn’t ignore a queen on the chessboard. The wounded fighters,” she tilted her head toward the clinic, “they told me about the Russian tanks.”

“BMDs,” Dutch said. “They’re light tanks that can be parachuted into remote sites. They were too far from us to do much damage.” He knew she would be upset with the danger.

“This time,” Sharon chided. “Next time, you won’t be so lucky. These aren’t Russians who got lost on their way fishing in Siberia. This is war. We

need something bigger than hunting rifles, and a lot more soldiers than we can rally in Duck Valley."

Dutch was thinking the same thing: they could repel the Russian paratroopers with heavy weapons sitting idle in National Guard armories. But how would they arm, fuel and man them?

Sharon cleared her throat. "Dutch, may I introduce you to someone?"

IT'D TAKEN ALMOST a month for Joe Whiterock to get home to Duck Valley Reservation. When the collapse struck, he'd been in Sacramento, at the annual gathering of the Native American Congress. Fortunately for him, the young men responsible for event security had put out an alert for possible civil disorder a week before. At the first sign of trouble, they'd swept Joe up, along with several dozen tribal elders, and spirited them back across the West to their tribal lands. The security boys were military veterans, and they'd come to the event with all the guns and ammunition California law would permit. The convoy leapfrogged from rez to rez, finally reaching Joe's home after four weeks. Four elders died along the way from stress and lack of medication. Survival was not an old man's game.

Joe wasn't an elected representative—he was too old for front-row politics. But given his unusual experience in commodities trading, and his unconventional way of looking at the world, the Congress invited him to their shindigs, if only to shake things up.

His life had been a succession of spasms of luck and wit. It hadn't surprised him that the President of the United States and his family had taken refuge with his tribe. Freakish happenstance was like bread and toast in the life of Joe Whiterock. He had a habit of putting himself in the path of the crazy train.

It seemed almost inevitable when Sharon McAdams guided her

disheveled husband across the hospital parking lot to meet Joe. The American president was dressed in dirty camouflage; small wounds speckled his face and arms.

He's just returning from combat against the Russians, Joe concluded.

"Hi, I'm Dutch McAdams," the American president extended a handshake. His white hair stuck out in all directions, like he'd been wearing a hat. The winter cold flushed his cheeks and nose red, like a healthy lumberjack returning from the forest. He looked younger than he'd seemed on television.

"Indeed you are, President McAdams." Joe smiled so wide it strained his cheek muscles. He returned the handshake and placed his other hand on the president's forearm. "Mister President, have you been up to mischief?"

"Perhaps," the president admitted. "I'm told you are the man behind the men."

It was a very direct thing to say, particularly among natives. Joe reminded himself that Dutch McAdams was a white American. Taking refuge among natives didn't make him a native. It wasn't rude if he didn't know any better.

"Thank you sir, but I'm sure that's not true. I'm an old man with more opinions than good sense. They indulge me." Joe nodded toward the small town, but he meant the Native American nation. It wasn't hollow humility; Joe never got over how much they honored him among the native tribes. Half the time, he suspected he was full of sheep shit.

But right now, he had a job to do. The President could unlock everything —save them from the dire future Bethany's AI predicted. Suddenly, Joe could see the way forward, but he withheld any sign of it from his face. Politicians like McAdams learned early how to capitalize on the upper hand, and Joe wouldn't give it away.

As tired as he looked, President McAdams kept the focus on Joe. "Sharon tells me that you negotiated the peace between the Mexican government and the Chiapas farmer rebellion? That is a story I would like to hear someday.

How did a Native American diplomat end up in southern Mexico in the middle of an insurgency?"

Joe couldn't stop himself from smiling. "Mr. President, you of all people know how those things work. I made a couple friends in Chiapas, found good souls who became lifelong brothers in the Mexican military, and we worked it out one night over tequila and Cuban cigars. There's no contention in the world that can survive the right tequila." Joe raised his hands as though imparting some maxim of diplomacy.

The president laughed. "Mr. Whitestone..."

"Whiterock," Joe corrected with a grin. "Common mistake. And my name's just Joe."

"Thank you. And I'm *just Dutch*."

Joe looked him in the eyes. "No sir, you're my president and I'm pleased to be at your service."

DUTCH MEANDERED to Joe Whiterock's home to share a sip of bourbon. He would need more help from the Native Americans if he was to confront the Russian threat; a *lot* more help.

Sharon left to fill her shift as a cook at the village commissary.

The laughing and storytelling between the two men would've been a delight, if not for the menace of the Russians lurking in the back of Dutch's mind.

"How can I be of service, sir?" Joe Whiterock interjected after the second pour of bourbon. It wasn't an accusation, but an invitation. He was saying, in his way, *it's okay to move on to business.* The afternoon light had gone dim, the telltale of a storm brewing overhead. Snow would fall overnight, and maybe for days thereafter.

Dutch inched forward on the couch. He cradled the glass in both hands.

“You know that Russians were searching the crash site of my aircraft. We destroyed most of their unit, but we have to assume they’re taking control of our missile bases in Montana, North Dakota and Wyoming. Eventually, they’ll figure out how to fire those missiles, with or without the nuclear codes. We need an army to stop them.”

Whiterock sat back in his overstuffed chair and contemplated. He sipped his bourbon. “Do you have any thoughts about who they plan on targeting? I was under the impression that Washington, D.C. was a ghost town. And since you’re here hiding under a rock in northern Nevada, I don’t see how gaining control of our missiles buys them anything.”

“Maybe they’re not planning to hit *us*.” Dutch stared at the thin layer of amber liquid in his glass. The bourbon had loosened his tongue. He drifted into the speculation he had not yet dared say. “If the Russians attacked a third party—Britain, France, India or even *China*—with our missiles, they could kill two birds with one stone. Whoever they hit might retaliate against us. They could incapacitate two enemies at once.” Dutch stopped. He left his thought unfinished.

“Hmm,” Joe hummed. “Likely China. China would retaliate against an American strike. And if the missiles originated from here, the Chinese would probably retaliate against the Midwest. Or maybe all of North America. Do we know anything about Chinese continuity of government?”

“Only rumors that they’ve landed in Hawaii and a couple places along the west coast. They’re just rumors. We don’t know anything concrete.” Dutch rolled the glass between his palms. “If any of those rumors turn out to be true, then the Chinese government is still intact. I’m not sure why the Russians would nuke China, though. They’ve been allies for sixty years.”

“Oil. Coal. Ports. Land. Take your pick. Russians like to win.”

Dutch didn’t know how the elderly Native American would be familiar with Russian geopolitics, but the assessment sounded about right. He too had learned that Russians were profoundly predictable. He could ask himself,

“What would the neighborhood bully do when no one was watching?” and that’d be it. Russians liked force. They didn’t mind getting their nose bloodied. *If you’re not cheating, you’re not playing hard enough,* a Russian friend once chided Joe over drinks. It was a phrase he recalled often when dealing with them on the world stage.

Joe Whiterock slapped his leg. “Well, that’s a lot to think about, Mr. President. If someone retaliated against the missile silos, it’s not just your land they’d be poisoning. It’d be our land too. How much of this can I share with the Native American Congress?”

“All of it,” Dutch replied. “The network of Native American tribes is, collectively, the biggest, standing government on the continent right now. If anyone’s going to stop the Russians, it’ll be you. I can scrounge up some weapons from the Idaho National Guard, but our soldiers are blown to the wind. Maybe there’s a military base out there we can rally to the flag, but we haven’t heard a peep from any of our bases other than Mountain Home, Idaho and a few rumblings from Camp Lejeune in North Carolina.”

“We might be able to help you with that,” Joe said. “Just before the crash, we tuned up our inter-tribal radio network. Satellite phone connections have been hit-or-miss, but the ham radio guys in the big tribes are on a regular transmission schedule. It’s complicated by meteorological factors, but we had a contact plan in place, and it’s still working. We can look into the status of several of the bases and report back.”

Dutch looked askance. Something didn’t pass the smell test. It felt like the moment when Sam Greaney showed up on Air Force One with too many personal protection agents, or like when a dirty bomb in the Middle East triggered a nuke in Los Angeles Harbor. *Weird coincidence that might not be coincidence.* A spider crawled up Dutch’s back. He was becoming attuned to the sensation: *suspicion*.

Joe Whiterock wasn’t telling the full truth. There was no reason the tribes should’ve “tuned up” an obsolete radio communications system in a world of

the internet.

Dutch studied the twitches of the old man's wrinkled face. "You resurrected ham radio? That showed a lot more foresight than our own military. Why did you do that?"

For the first time in the conversation, the old man's eyes chilled. Dutch recognized it; he was about to be told a lie.

"Just good fortune." Joe Whiterock shrugged. "Native Americans were taught the lesson by the white man." He jingled the ice in his glass to emphasize the point. "Plan for the rug to get yanked out, and you'll never be disappointed."

Dutch had been served a platitude and he took it as his cue to leave. He knew to stop before the real posturing began. He polished off his bourbon, thanked his host, slipped into his coat and headed back to the double wide trailer where his family now lived.

JOE WHITEROCK HAD BEEN ENTIRELY sincere when he'd told the American president that he was "at his service," but it hadn't taken long for the desperate white man to put Joe up against the ragged edge of his loyalties.

Joe rinsed the whiskey tumblers in the sink while he contemplated the opportunity before him. The girl with the AI told him that the Constitution needed serious changes and then the President of the United States showed up on his doorstep to sip bourbon. Joe had learned to make the most of windows of opportunity like this one.

"Grandfather," his granddaughter Mika interrupted his thoughts, floating from the kitchen like a water spirit. She wore military camouflage. She'd gone to war for the first time that morning. While he spoke with the American president, he'd also been worrying about her. He knew she was safe and physically uninjured, but he fretted that she'd be changed. Nobody

killed without it leaving a mark, least of all his high-strung darling girl.

“Mika. Sit down, please.” He motioned to the couch. She hesitated, which wasn’t a surprise. She wouldn’t want to discuss it but he would insist. Joe had gone to war himself, once upon a time, and he’d been around men of war most his life. He had no illusions—his granddaughter would be struck by this day. Talking about it might help.

She sat down, set her rifle aside and folded her hands in her lap. Native women had performed the identical acquiescence for fifty thousand years—the folding of the hands that drew the cascade of patience and the fortification of resolve.

The man had the floor. But the woman would dictate the outcome. There was even a native saying that described it: *the eagle snatches the fish, but the weir net catches them all.*

Joe chuckled while she waited. How she remained single, given her dazzling intelligence and angelic, open face, remained a mystery to him. He chalked it up to her slightly-larger-than-normal backside. American boys were fools in how they chose their mates, and Native American boys were not far behind in their stupidity. Joe’s own woman, Sandi, had passed three years before. She was another wise listener; like a mother fox, curled just inside the burrow, aware of all that transpired in the field.

“Tell me about the battle,” he asked.

Mika shifted in her seat. Her eyes rolled slightly, marshaling patience. “Grandfather, you already know. It was horrible. It was the most terrible thing I’ve ever done,” she choked, then composed herself.

He nodded, but said nothing.

His granddaughter continued, “I thought I might be blown to pieces, or worse, that one of the others would be blown to pieces. I don’t know how nobody died. It seems impossible that none of us were killed.” She touched her face and the gentleness of her delicate hands belied the frayed look in her eyes.

“You deserve more than to inherit this world,” he said. “Children shouldn’t go to war.”

She nodded, not denying it. He wished she would deny it, and relieve some of his guilt. He was a statesman and his job was to stop war. She knew history and philosophy at least as well as he did, and he hadn’t done enough to stop this apocalypse. His granddaughter was haunted with remorse, a rifle leaning against her knee, her face flushed with sorrow for the men she’d helped kill.

“The ache in your soul will fade, some, with time,” he said. It was the pathetic refrain of the father who had failed—the medicine man who no longer conversed with the gods. She sat up straight and wiped her face. She ran the bolt on her rifle and checked the empty chamber, sliding her little finger into the breach as a failsafe, just as he’d taught her to do when he’d taken her deer hunting.

She must’ve seen it in his eyes, and she looked aside. It frightened him a little, to see his Mika boxing up her grief like he’d seen fighting men do. It wasn’t a skill for women. Not for his granddaughter.

“You overheard McAdams?” Joe asked her. He’d heard her tinkling glasses in the sink. She’d been in the background while he talked to the president. He knew she would listen and advise him later. They’d become a team: he with almost a century of experience and she with a modern education.

Mika nodded.

“What’s your counsel, then?”

“You know my counsel. Ask Sagehen.” She meant Bethany and the AI. Between Joe and Mika, they called her Sagehen—the mythical founder of the Great Basin people. It seemed proper to compare the strange girl and her computer to a god. They were both so incomprehensible.

Joe barked a laugh, then rubbed his face. “She gives terrible answers.”

“But she knows how to engage the People of the Thick Smoke.” It was an

old insult against the white men—that their campfires burned dirty.

Joe nodded. She was right. The AI was their only hedge against a future of suffering. They should ask the AI how to convince the president to advance their amendments to the Constitution.

Joe leaned back in his favorite chair. “At this point is doesn’t matter if their smoke is thick or not. If Sagehen can stare into her crystal ball and tell us how to avoid nuclear apocalypse with the Russians, I’m all ears. While you’re at it, ask her if you should marry Sharon McAdams’ son. Maybe we can extract a little good out of all of this.” He rolled the ice around his tumbler and took a drink.

Mika smiled and looked down at her hands. Marriage was an uncomfortable topic. She was twenty-seven years old and had once been a finalist in the Miss Indian World pageant. It hadn’t led to a husband, nor any boyfriends worthy of note. The pageant had been focused on Native American cultural knowledge. Joe told himself she would’ve won if they’d given her beauty greater weight. His granddaughter’s perfect face melted his wind-beaten heart.

After the pageant, she’d grown even more serious. Her study and her degree from UCLA had taken her down the path of social justice, ecology and Native American studies. Now, she tossed around phrases like “indigenous self-determination” and “red power.” To Joe, it sounded like a pain in the ass. But it’d been a strange world, with urban populations collapsing under their own weight and social tension so thick political debate wasn’t even a thing anymore. Duck Valley was surrounded by a hundred and fifty mile-wide moat of sand and sagebrush. The tension in the cities drifted into the background, like a movie he’d seen and mostly forgotten.

“I’m not sure what to ask Bethany next. Where do we go from here?” Mika asked. Her voice had lost its edge. She had surrendered to sadness, at least for today.

Joe was an old man. The inevitability of death gave him the luxury of

thinking in terms of history, not just his own survival. “Perhaps we should ask her what to do differently? Maybe we can wring more than two hundred and fifty years out of the next run of American history. If we change the law, we change the society. Like she says, it’s all about the Constitution.”

“If we return to the old ways...” Mika began with her normal rant about how native ways were the one-stop solution to injustice.

He cut her off with a belly laugh. “Think bigger.” He made a big circle with his hands. “The old ways were garbage in some respects. If we want a better future, we need to ask better questions. *How do we return to a time when people starved to death every five or six seasons?*—that’s what you’re suggesting, and it’s not a very good question.”

“I’m too tired to have this argument with you again, Grandfather,” she said. She’d argue for tradition and indigenous power. He’d argue for fresh thinking and cooperation with the “colonial whites.” The old man argued for the new and the young woman argued for the old. The irony had ceased to amuse her, but he still loved to debate.

“I apologize. Today is not the day. There’s been enough life and death for now.” He kissed her on the top of her head. “Sleep, and dream of peace. And handsome boys.”

MIKA WHITEROCK RETURNED her 30-06 to the gun safe in her bedroom. As far as she knew, none of her colleagues at UCLA had ever fired a gun, much less kept one in their room. Her grandfather had given her the hunting rifle on her fifteenth birthday when he’d taught her how to hunt. The gun safe also held a Ruger 10-22 and a Smith & Wesson revolver she carried in the glove box of her old Subaru. It’d stayed in her glove box for a year at UCLA before she realized it wasn’t legal to have a loaded gun in a car in California.

The gun safe was wedged between two brimming bookshelves in her

bedroom. The shelves were packed with politics, philosophy, botany and Native American studies. There wasn't a single work of fiction. It all felt so serious, and such a waste, like she'd spent her life preparing to become an astronaut only to become a pet groomer instead.

A large hand-woven basket slouched on top of the gun safe—her gathering basket for buckberries and camas root. It'd been a long time since she'd gathered food with the women of the tribe. She'd been away at school for six years.

Books, guns, baskets.

She loved the land, and longed for it to thrive. She'd always been different than her social justice warrior friends in Los Angeles. They built castles of words. She collected forage from the desert. Her college friends had co-opted her—a "person of color"—into their cause, but she faced east, toward the dawning sun. They faced west, toward the coming night.

Still, she missed them and she worried about them. They were people of the iPhone, not people of the land, but they were her friends.

She shucked out of her fatigues and stripped down to thermal underwear. She shivered at the memory of heavy machine gun rounds whistling overhead. Her ears thrummed with the concussion of the cannon shells.

She'd been warned about the coming collapse but she hadn't told her friends—she'd been too embarrassed to talk doom-and-gloom in the clean streets and warm sun of Southern California. They would've given her shame-faced looks and chastened her for sounding like a Right Winger.

But in her native life, Mika held inside information. Her grandfather led the think tank attached to the Native American Congress, and Mika was his heir apparent. They were expected to mine and analyze information about future trends, and with Bethany's AI they'd struck a vein as wide as a river.

When Mika brought Bethany Richards to her grandfather's doorstep, freshly expelled from UCLA not leaving her dorm room for half a semester, he'd cleared his schedule for nine days. He struggled to grasp the concepts of

artificial intelligence, but didn't quit until regression analysis and predictive modeling made sense to him. He took Bethany in.

At first, she worked out of the Whiterock home in Duck Valley. The AI got smarter and gained access to more computing power. She was too naive to know it was impossible, so she began with a titanic question: *why is the world like it is?* Bethany reverse-engineered the geo-political history of the world.

It was a costly project. Her grandfather invested over fifty million dollars from the fortune he'd made trading commodities. Bethany's voracious appetite for data cost him a huge chunk of his personal net worth. Glinda's predictions got more and more interesting, and Mika's grandfather paid for it all. Living with Bethany was like living with a minor, capricious god.

Joe and Mika found a better home for her in the basement of an Idaho tribal casino, with a fast, fiber optic connection. A friend in the Shoshone-Bannock tribe of Fort Hall gave her a place to work, and agreed to keep it secret. The project was so speculative, so irresponsible, and Bethany was so *strange*, no one was in a great hurry to be publicly associated with it.

The Native American Congress were their people, but that didn't change human nature. Joe Whiterock was an outlier with iconoclastic tendencies. He had powerful enemies in the NAC. If they discovered that he was keeping a mentally-challenged girl, laboring in a basement, eating only sugary cereal, there would be questions aimed at taking him down.

So Mika's former college roommate worked for three years, secretly, in a dark corner of an Indian casino. Bethany called her artificial intelligence "Glinda," and after a year and a half, the AI had gained access to a tremendous body of data regarding every historical move of every government, national and local, anywhere on the worldwide web. She incorporated every census, every town hall meeting, every election and every voting record that ever existed. She collected a massive database of global trade transactions; oil, gas exploration, wheat shipments, stock price

movements, tax shifts and infrastructure depreciation. She especially focused on law: every word of every statute, constitution, local code and declaration that had ever been recorded.

A year before the collapse, with a belly full of over two hundred million gigabytes of data, the AI began predicting the past. For a year, Bethany and Glinda ran trillions of past predictions from 1917 forward, and she taught herself how to predict what had already happened. The first six months, she was astoundingly bad at it—then something clicked and the AI got better very quickly.

From a point of view from 1950, she correctly guessed the election and assassination of John F. Kennedy. Then, she predicted the American moon landing within six days. She taught herself to predict the future by forgetting the past, then guessing what would happen.

Mika asked to see the prediction of the assassination of JFK. Bethany gave Mika "the look." It was her most frequent expression—a tilt of the head and a swipe of her bangs that telegraphed frustration at being pulled away from her computer screens.

"You're not going to understand it," she said to Mika.

"Try me." Mika crossed her arms. Bethany and her AI weren't the only geniuses in the room.

Bethany hummed and ran her finger across a line of code on her screen. She paused and clicked a few keys to stop the lines scrolling past. Then she translated the code: "Given—the dataset—which is two-thirds of all data in the world," Bethany looked up to make sure Mika understood, "if today was March 17th, 1926, at 16:46 Greenwich Mean Time, state the percentage odds that John F. Kennedy will be assassinated on November 22nd, 1963 in Dallas, Texas."

"What's her answer?" Mika asked.

Bethany's finger came away from the screen. Lines of data scrolled by, again, very quickly.

“.0897%, 2.6786%, .0034%, .4456%, .0002%,...Should I keep reading?”

“I don’t understand,” Mika sighed.

“I told you.”

“Why all those percentages? What’s the answer?”

Bethany tore herself away from the screens and swiveled her chair to face Mika. “Glinda’s guessing. Billions of guesses every hour, using billions of logic trees, incorporating millions of datasets. Wrong guesses are mostly what we want. She’s learning how ***not*** to guess the future.”

In a glimmer, Mika understood something core about Bethany’s genius: failing didn’t bother her in the slightest—nor did it bother her AI. Failure generated better data, faster, than hoping for success. She and Glinda had a limitless appetite for looking stupid, and that made them superhuman. Almost everything humans did was aimed at avoiding failure. Bethany and the AI defied one of the most fundamental compulsions of man—to be right.

“What percentage accuracy are you hoping to achieve in your predictive models?” To Mika’s ear, the question sounded intelligent.

The look in Bethany’s eyes stripped the feeling away like a burp in the wind. “Weren’t you listening?” she glanced back at the screens, obviously anxious to return to her work. “We want *low percentage* returns on our queries. We’re learning how to predict what won’t happen.”

“How’s that useful?”

Bethany munched on a mouthful of cereal and stared at her keyboard, sifting for words. “If you shoot arrows at a target, it’s easy to hit everywhere that isn’t the center. But if you miss enough—a trillion, trillion times—everything you’re *not* hitting is a bullseye. Glinda isn’t trying to get history right. She’s trying to get it wrong—and then less-wrong.”

“When you predict history, what’s a bullseye?” Mika noted the frustration in her own voice.

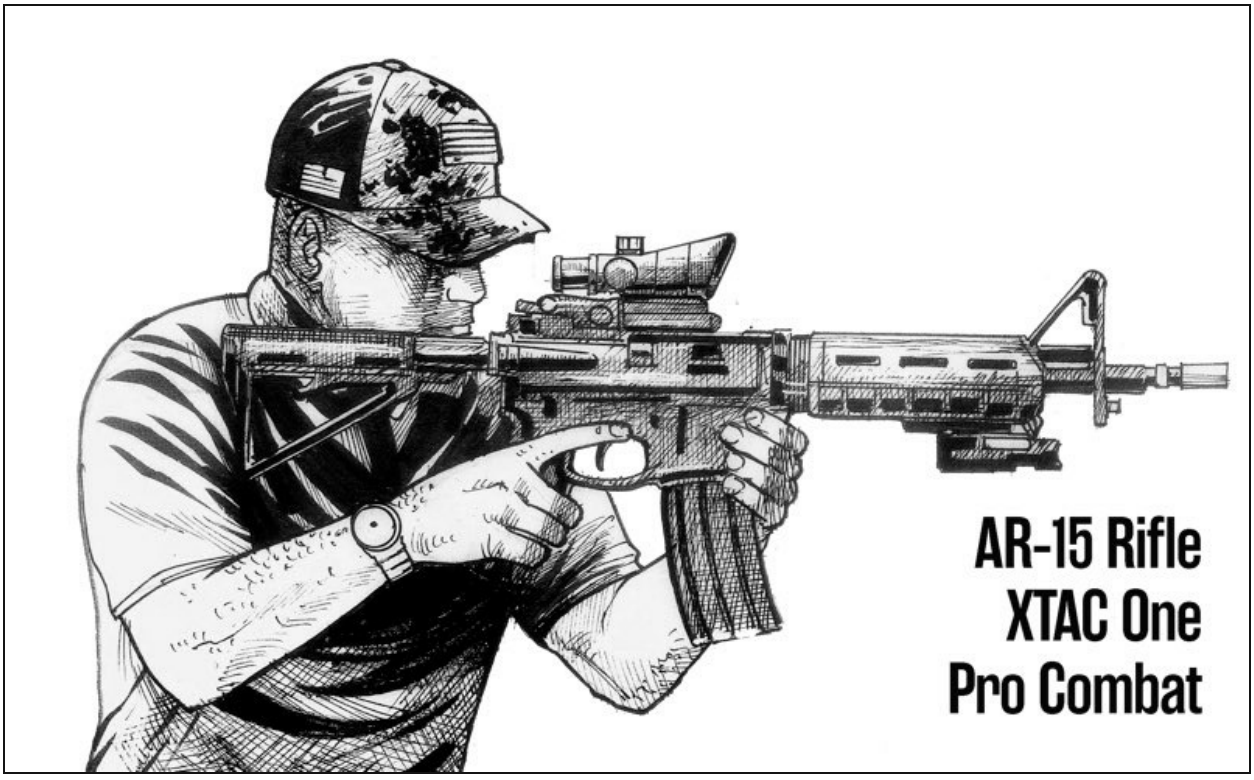
“A bullseye?” Bethany acted as though she’d never considered the question. “Anything over ten or eleven percent accuracy. Per day, I mean; ten

or eleven percent likelihood that a target event will occur on a target day. That's a bullseye."

It didn't sound very impressive to Mika. She threw up her hands. They were supposed to help the NAC prepare for future events by taking advantage of trends in law and culture. It was the basic concept behind how her grandfather had made a fortune in commodities. But, what Bethany was describing sounded like a bar game—like throwing darts at a dartboard with history as the target.

Bethany turned to her screens, seemingly exhausted by the interview. When Mika left the basement of the Fort Hall casino, Bethany did not wave goodbye.

3



Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

Datapoint, current: Russian paratroopers search for United States nuclear codes at 42.850542, -115.715801. Russian troops fail to

locate nuclear codes.

Datapoint, current: United States President, Nathaniel "Dutch" McAdams has no communication with, or command or control over, the United States military.

Datapoint, current: United States President, Nathaniel "Dutch" McAdams requests military assistance from the First People nations to repel Russian incursions into United States territory.

Query: Maximize blended life expectancy of Native Americans during fourth quarter 2042, 2062, and 2500 A.D..

Bethany's benefactors had revised their original question. It'd taken six days of back-and-forth over ham radio, which had given her time to think. She had jotted down, and rejected, thirty-seven iterations of the question.

Bethany and her AI, Glinda, concluded with a 96.8976% probability that Russian military controlled, or would shortly control, all three United States Air Force bases that harbored Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The process of refining a question for Glinda the Good Witch was slow, and Bethany did nothing to speed it up. She shepherded the computational cycles at her disposal like a mother hen over a brood of wild chicks. She'd already seen degradation in the computer network she'd inherited from the dying world. Little-by-little, the server farms perished—their solar cells were stolen off the roofs of buildings or their battery backups died; one corroded cell at a time. There was a limit to Glinda's omniscience and that limit was

measured in years, not decades.

Bethany considered sending the query back to Joe Whiterock for the thirty-seventh time because it was still stupid. Why were they still maximizing for Native American life span?

She knew the answer, but she didn't want to discuss it. The radio operator would look at her with exasperation; the look on his face would imply that she was too ignorant for words.

Of course, they cared more about Native Americans, his scrunched brows and hard lip would imply. *Everyone cared more about their own people.*

She made the adjustment to the question without asking Whiterock, re-read it, then submitted it to Glinda.

> *Query: Maximize blended life expectancy of <u>all</u> people on North American continent during fourth quarter 2042, 2062, and 2500 A.D.*

It would take time. The old regressions—prior to the proliferation of social media and cheap cameras, were faster, but less accurate. The quantity of data had increased by an order of magnitude every sixteen months for the thirty years before the collapse, so near-future predictive analytics took longer. Glinda knew how to ignore irrelevant stuff. She didn't waste cycles on analyzing the surveillance camera at the Penobscot, Illinois Quick-e-mart. She'd learned what data she could ignore. That discernment had taken two years and countless gigaflops of data throughput.

Glinda the Good Witch was a hard worker. She was the furthest thing from strong AI; she hadn't achieved self-awareness or anything fancy like that. There was no reason for her to do so. Glinda barely spoke English—speaking instead in the clipped, cruel prose of numbers and logic strings.

There was one thing Glinda did exceedingly well: she broke history down to its prime factors. There had been a lot of talk about the "butterfly effect" where the flap of a butterfly's wings in China could cause a hurricane in the

Atlantic. But Glinda had discovered a very different reality. She'd proven that history could be predicted based almost entirely on a few "thick" factors.

Abraham Lincoln or no Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War almost always happened in 1860 or 1861—and it almost always lasted four years and almost always ended in the slaves being freed and Atlanta being burned to the ground. It was the same with World War One, and World War Two and the Viet Nam War. They happened no matter what individual actors did. People as a group were astoundingly predictable. Individuals made little difference to the tide of history.

This was good news. It meant Glinda didn't have to incorporate every motive of every individual in order to make useful predictions.

"What did Abraham Lincoln have for breakfast on the morning of May 16th, 1859 and did it put him in a fighting frame of mind?" Even if Stephen Douglas won the election, and Abraham Lincoln went back to small-town lawyering, the slaves were freed and the president was assassinated. It didn't matter if Lincoln's wife made him eggs and bacon or squirrel and grits.

Time and again, Glinda revealed that the future pivoted around chunky stuff like the cotton trade in the American South or the wording of the Constitution.

The Second Amendment of the Constitution landed America in the apocalypse with 400 million firearms in private ownership. If Bethany and Glinda changed one word in the Second Amendment to "the right of the *militia* to keep and bear arms," instead of "the right of the *people* to keep and bear arms," the number of firearms evaporated from 400 million to 2.4 million. In the computer model, removing private ownership of firearms pushed up the date of the Black Autumn collapse to the winter of 1972. For some inscrutable reason, private firearm ownership changed the historical baseline of the country. The change of just one word in the Bill of Rights caused the nation to fail fifty years earlier.

Wording of law mattered a great deal. Unfortunately for their current

purposes, the wording of the American Constitution and Bill of Rights turned out to be within eight percent of ideal. Bethany and Glinda had tried one hundred and seventy-six thousand variations on the founding documents of the United States and they almost always ended up with a worse result. Only eight percent of the time did the result improve, and sometimes the improvements pushed the collapse only a couple months later into the future. It appeared that tectonic factors such as social media, smart phones and streaming video introduced variables into the model that drove the odds of American survival into the ground, and the rest of the world along with it.

Glinda couldn't say why because that wasn't what she had evolved to do. The AI could only say *what would happen*, but she couldn't grasp the reason, no more than a puppy could explain how dog food was made at the factory.

Glinda wolfed down data and extruded a result. She didn't know how it smelled.

Duck Valley Sho-Pai Reservation
Duck Valley, Nevada

THE WINTER MORNING had painted a dusky frost across the still water. The ducks and loons paddled along the thin margin between ice and slowly-moving water. Dutch's gloved hands were so cold they could barely grip the training rifle.

Soon, the partisans would travel to the missile fields in Wyoming and likely encounter Russian paratroopers. They would face combat again, and this time, they would be moving to contact, not ambushing them from the high ground. They couldn't count on luck in Wyoming. They might have to fight a real fight, and Dutch McAdams had gotten his ass kicked in every training exercise so far. After two weeks of running mock assaults, he'd been

profoundly humbled. In hindsight, they'd gotten very lucky in the ambush over the crash site. Like one-in-a-hundred lucky.

Dutch and his partisan team rose out of Thacker Slough and climbed the banks. The eleven partisan fighters under his command fanned out along the river's edge and crept toward the target of the training scenario: the home of the mock "HVT," Jake Springhorn. Three dozen dead cars sprinkled Jake's lot like last year's good intentions. Dutch's team was supposed to assault Jake's ramshackle home.

Dutch waved his team forward across the fifty yard gap between the slough and what appeared to be a pigpen, surrounded by half-a-dozen rusting trucks. They bounded forward in two-man teams, and took cover behind the vehicles.

No dogs barked. No men shouted. The ducks quacked behind them.

Dutch drew in a breath and exhaled a cloud of vapor. It didn't seem right —they were leapfrogging directly toward the structure. It seemed a bit direct, but what other option did he have? The team of twelve moved up through the rusting hulls as the tension mounted.

They were too close to back off and reassess. Dutch thought he would've seen something before now to tip them off. He still didn't know how many opposition force "OpFor" were inside the building guarding the HVT. At this point, his team was exposed and committed.

He felt fifty again, maybe even forty-five. He'd been forced to find new clothes that fit, which worked out since all he wore these days was camouflage. He could run five miles now; not fast, but he didn't have to stop and catch his breath. His body urged him forward, drunk on its new physicality. Dutch looked the house over one last time.

Nothing stirred. The building stood mute. The ducks argued, in their own timeless world of water and weeds.

Dutch waved his squad forward and launched the final assault. He opened up on the building as his fire team buddy bolted forward to next cover. Dutch

jumped ahead of him and the squad rushed forward. They sprinted, one dead vehicle at a time, covering one another in shooting pairs as they maneuvered toward the front door.

Dutch rolled around the side of a pickup truck up on blocks and sprinted the last thirty feet to the structure.

Beep-beep-beep his training vest trilled and lit up red.

“Oh no,” he barely had a chance to swear before his torso locked up in a spasm of electric shock. He stumbled, but kept running.

Beep. Beep-beep-beep. Beep-beep-bee-bee-beep.

Dutch slammed into the wall of the house and dropped to the ground. He was “dead.” The training scenario was over for him, and he wasn’t the only one. Several of his teams’ plate carrier vests lit up like Christmas at Macy’s. The survivors fought from behind junk cars against an enemy that appeared like phantoms out of the sagebrush and tamarisk.

Dutch tipped against the wall and considered the battle space—the training ground was a messy yard in the middle of several hundred acres of high desert flatland. There was little cover, aside from the brush and the junker cars. They’d approached from the creek, but they’d been forced to cross open ground. *What had he done wrong?*

The last of his team fought on, but they were toast. Their training rifles blasted away in a desperate last stand. Half his team mulled around now, their helmets and vests lit up red. Dutch had again led his team into a butt-reaming by Agent Brooks and his OpFor.

A team of three OpFor darted across the dirt road and closed the circle on Dutch’s survivors. On the roof of the house, a sniper slithered behind the chimney. He racked up “hits” on every helmet that exposed itself over the cars. Inside the house, in the window, an OpFor shooter acted as bait.

“End Ex,” Brooks shouted as he came out of the house. “All stations, end exercise! EndEx!”

With only five men against Dutch’s twelve, Brooks and OpFor had wiped

the ground with them, again. Dutch's team still wasn't ready. They could charge into Wyoming after the Russians, but the Spetsnaz paratroopers would kick their asses. Agent Brooks had been saying it all along, but until this painful, electro-shock string of training defeats, Dutch hadn't believed him.

Brooks, the former Marine Raider shouted his mantra after each ass-whooping: "A trained commando will win against partisans twenty-to-one. A fighter without force-on-force training is a random gun. He might get lucky once in a blue moon, but he'll mostly end up dead against a real gunfighter."

The *pop-pop-pop-pop* of training AR-15s and pistols quieted. Dutch took stock: only two of his squad had survived the counter-assault. Everyone else was glowing like Christmas trees.

"I hate this damn game." Dutch rubbed his belly under the shock belt as he approached Brooks.

"You'll hate it less if you do proper recon," Brooks said to his Commander in Chief.

Recon. Dutch hadn't even thought of that. *Of course.*

He could've sent a couple go-getters to loop around the property a half-hour before the assault. They might've spotted the sniper on the roof, and maybe even kicked up the men in the sagebrush. Dutch had focused on the assault itself. He hadn't planned it out like a real mission, with recon, rally points, contingencies and an exfil plan. He'd thought of the FTX—field training exercise—like a paintball game, not a military mission where every "life" was a dear friend at risk. He needed to think ahead, not get dragged into a fight of the enemy's design.

Brooks read his mind. "There's more to it than running and gunning." He grinned like a wolf dripping with the blood of his kill.

"Can we train on recon?" Dutch asked as he kicked apart a clump of snow along the dirt road.

"That's what we'll be doing all next week," Brooks said. "A week of recon, another week of assaults, then we can move out to Wyoming. We still

won’t be Spetsnaz. I’m praying we won’t make contact with them, anyway.”

Dutch considered his men. The red lights on their plate carrier vests and boonie hats had gone dark now. The FTX had reset itself and the next squad would be prepping to go against OpFor.

The training scenarios had been a shit show for all the teams, not just Dutch’s squad. After a few grisly defeats, it became obvious that everyone was getting schooled.

The partisans would’ve never have known how much there was left to learn if it weren’t for the training rifles. Dutch had scooped them up when he raided the airbase armory back in Nebraska. He inadvertently grabbed a bunch of XTAC-equipped rifles and handguns when he raided the armory at Offut. Base security apparently used the modified airsoft guns to drill for crowd control. Among the hundreds of rifles Dutch had snatched, he’d grabbed two dozen training rifles and pistols. Except for a little device under the fore grip, they looked almost exactly the same.

The supply sergeant from Idaho National Guard figured out how to get the SINCGARS Humvee to act like a local cell tower and spoof some smart phones into thinking they had network connection. With the training rifles, vests and hats working, Brooks moved their training straight into what he called “force-on-force.”

“The closer we get to training the real thing, the better.” He seemed especially pleased with the shock belts. “Pain compliance!” he crowed as he handed them out. “Set these babies to Level Ten, and I will guarantee you will experience an *enriched learning environment.*”

True to his word, Brooks and OpFor dismantled the partisans’ confidence.

“Range shooting is NOT three-dimensional combat,” Brooks thundered at Dutch’s squad the last time they got hammered in training. “Your enemy thinks, moves and shoots back. Get used to it, ladies. Target practice does not win gunfights. This is real life. You need to *think* and *plan* before you

commit, or friends die!”

With the latest debacle complete, Dutch rallied his squad to clear the area for the next training evolution. Brooks shouted orders to rack the gear and return-to-base. They’d have their AAR—after action review—at the commissary where they could eat breakfast, sip coffee and take a frank look at the galactic mess they’d made. If this had been the real deal, eleven men and women would’ve died in Jake Springhorn’s yard.

Dutch shucked his plate vest to let the cold morning air swish under his fleece. All of the training in the world wouldn’t matter if nuclear missiles took flight before they arrived. But it wouldn’t help anyone if they showed up on the missile fields and were immediately obliterated.

Right after the partisan ambush at the crash site of Air Force One, taking back their country had *seemed* more likely. They had a clear enemy and a clear objective: *run the Russians out.* They’d achieved total mission success against the Spetsnaz sifting through the wreckage of the airplane.

Why, just three weeks after victory did Dutch feel like an adolescent pretending to be a soldier?

It hadn’t been until their sixth FTX training scenario that Dutch’s team stopped accidentally shooting *one another*. Even after ten practice assaults, the app showed anywhere between one and three “blue-on-blue” kills each time. They were their own worst enemy. Mostly, his team would lose contact with one another—radios confused the issue more than they helped—then end up sending laser bullets into their own forces.

In training, every time Agent Brooks switched the scenario—from assault, to ambush, to running roadblocks, to patrolling, to clearing houses, to capturing an HVT—Dutch’s team randomly invented new ways to screw up and shoot one another.

They *always lost* against OpFor. Dutch got to the point where mission success wasn’t even the primary goal. He would happily settle for zero blue-on-blue casualties.

“Mr. President,” Dutch’s second-in-command, Mika Whiterock, interrupted his agony. “We only had one friendly-fire casualty this time.”

It was what passed for “good news” at this point. Mika showed him the screen. Dutch didn’t know what he was looking at, but there was only one red bar on the team roster list.

“Thank you, Mika. Who made the mistake?” He felt like he should probably know, but he didn’t.

She pretended to check without really looking, “Um, that was you, sir. You shot Reynolds in the head.” She pointed at the screen and avoided eye contact.

So damned much to learn...

Dutch felt old, and frankly embarrassed, but he also felt alive. It’d been a long time since he’d learned something that made him feel like the village idiot.

His former secret service agent trotted alongside him as Dutch slumped back toward town.

“How’d it go, Mr. President?”

By the look in his eye, Dutch could tell Brooks already knew the answer. “Well, Agent Brooks, it looks like I’m a trained killer. But I’m still mostly killing my own guys.”

Brooks laughed. “Everyone shoots friendlies at first. Your team’s getting better. You might not see it, but I do.”

“Are we good enough to go up against Russian paratroopers?” Dutch asked.

“Not hardly,” Brooks admitted. “Not without vastly superior numbers, and certainly not against armor. We need a lot more troops. Shouldn’t you be doing that, sir, instead of training like a fresh recruit? Finding us a bigger army?”

Dutch unslung his training rifle and passed it to Brooks. “The natives haven’t committed.” Dutch didn’t like the turn in the conversation. Agent

Brooks was right, of course. Dutch should be shaking the trees to raise more troops. Instead, he was training to become a commando. It was a waste of his political cache and diplomatic talent. Yet butt-kissing the natives and glad-handing locals was the last thing Dutch wanted to do. He had failed as president in spectacular form. Anyone with a lick of sense wouldn't take him seriously—s*houldn't* take him seriously. Dutch understood, even embraced it. He was no longer that man. Learning to soldier was occupational therapy. A necessary change in career.

Brooks slung the rifle over his shoulder. "We need numbers, and you're the best man to make that happen." Brooks stopped short of telling Dutch what to do.

"Alex," Dutch used Agent Brooks' first name, "I think you underestimate how pissed off people are at me. I fumbled the country on the ten yard line."

Brooks examined the ground. "You're all that remains of the government. We've got to make the most of it."

Again, Brooks was right. It didn't matter that Dutch was a loser as president. He was last man Americans had seen in the Oval Office.

"I'll lean on Joe Whiterock some more," Dutch conceded.

There was a lot they didn't know, Dutch reminded himself. He'd built up an idea of the Russians using American nukes to strike the Chinese, but that was speculation. They needed firsthand observation.

Brooks scratched his new beard. "The fact that the Russians were searching for the suitcase implies that they haven't cracked the launch commands. That was weeks ago. We might be running out of time."

"We need to see for ourselves," Dutch said. "I can't say with any certainty what the Russians are doing here. They fought back when we attacked them, but so far, we have no hard proof they're here to hurt us."

A whistle blew in the distance. The next FTX would start soon. Brooks turned toward Jake Springhorn's house, then stopped. "Give me another week of training," he said, "We still won't be ready to go up against

Spetsnaz, but we should be capable of a long-range recon patrol." He shaded his eyes to watch the squad of trainees disappear into the creek bed. "I've gotta go. Good luck talking with Whiterock about more troops; that is, if you're up to it."

Dutch didn't feel like he was. When he considered playing the role of the U.S. President, exhaustion overcame him. Sharon called it depression. Dutch despised that word.

Duty was duty. He'd fucked his country over, and he didn't get to be a prima donna about it. He'd go see the Indian statesman and do what he could to get more infantry from the Native Americans.

JOE WHITEROCK HELD a single-sided page of paper with six amendments to the Constitution of the United States. He stood in his living room, staring out the window. A half-drunk bottle of bourbon called to him on the side table.

He crumpled the page in his hands, then smoothed it out. Then crumpled it again.

The piece of paper was really quite valuable—there were only three reams of paper in all of Duck Valley. That double-spaced page might also be the most important document since the original U.S. Constitution. *So, why did the words make him feel like a long-tailed cat at a barn dance?*

How the hell was he supposed to sell these Constitutional amendments to the Native American Congress? How was he supposed to sell them to the President of the United States?

Joe clung to the biggest secret of his life, perhaps the biggest secret in history. Only he and Mika knew that the most powerful person in the world was an obese, probably autistic, girl in her late twenties. She hid in a dark basement, playing word games with a computer, and jingling the keys to the future of the human race. She wasn't even a very nice person.

Joe could not put forward Sagehen as the originator of these proposed changes to the Constitution. *Nobody* would accept her as the architect of the next United States. There wasn't a dog's chance at humping an alley cat.

Joe took a deep breath and let it roll out like a low growl. He smoothed the page against his thigh. Again.

He might be able to "sell" these amendments to the NAC—the Native American Congress. Joe was the head of their policy think tank. Mika, his granddaughter, was supposed to take over as Executive Director as soon as she finished her master's degree. It was the think tank's job to come up with new ideas. He'd invent some bullshit reason as to why the amendments were crucial and obvious—despite the fact that he hadn't a clue. They'd been spat out by an AI—the same AI that'd predicted the Black Autumn collapse. Joe didn't know how these amendments would save them from a 500 year dark age, but he believed they would.

At his age, he'd grown comfortable with all the things he didn't understand—would never understand. He'd learned to pray and play the cards he was dealt.

These six changes were just a handful of new words, added to the founding document like leaves floating from the sky. Before Sagehen, Joe had never considered any of the ideas, nor had he ever heard anyone suggesting them. They were neither Left nor Right, white nor native. The ideas, if they could even be called ideas, seemed almost perfectly random.

"Article 1, Section 2

"No Person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the Age of twenty five Years, ***and who has produced food from the soil or water with his own hands for at least five years sufficient to feed himself***, …."

What did that even mean? They were twenty-one words, layered on top of the U.S. Constitution, that *required* a congressional representative to be a farmer or fisherman. *Why?* Why not require them to be diesel mechanics? And, why require it only of representatives and not senators?

While Joe warmed his tumbler in his hands, he rolled back time and considered how he'd gotten here, with a crumpled page in his hands and the world's fate hanging in the balance.

President McAdams had asked Joe to help him raise an army of Native Americans. Joe asked Sagehen for a list of "asks" in exchange. She gave him this list, promising it'd drastically shorten the dark age to come.

He expected a list with items like "more tribal lands," or "give the State of Wyoming to Native Americans," or even "guarantee a hundred native seats in Congress." Those conditions would've made sense, and they would've been easy to pitch to the native congress. Instead, Sagehen came back with this. None of the "asks" had anything to do with Native Americans, reservation lands or indigenous rights.

That morning, when Joe and Mika read Sagehen's list, they laughed out loud and stared at one another in disbelief.

"I screwed this up, didn't I, Grandpa?" Mika's face reddened in shame. "I shouldn't have asked you to fund her. I'm so sorry. This is my fault."

She hugged him and laid her head on his shoulder. They'd blown a big chunk of his bank account on Bethany Richards.

Joe couldn't stand to see his granddaughter sad, so he forced himself to consider the unlikely alternative. Maybe Sagehen was more right than they knew.

He held Mika's shoulders back so they saw eye-to-eye. "Hold up, Mourning Dove. Perhaps there's wisdom here. We should ask Bethany why. Why these particular conditions? For example, why ask for *a tax on robots?* There aren't any robots now. Why tax them? Let's not be too hasty. Maybe we can use this as a starter list, and maybe make some sensible changes…"

Mika nodded and wiped her nose.

They walked across the highway to the school building where the ham radio operator, Doug Windtrotter, chatted with neighboring tribes. They reached Bethany, half way across the state, on the first try.

“Why does Glinda want us to request these things?” Mika asked Bethany over the radio.

There was a long pause, which usually meant that Bethany was trying to put machine language into words. “Because you asked to ‘maximize life expectancy of First People.’ These changes to the Constitution achieve a statistically-optimal outcome that matches your requested criteria.”

Mika took a deep breath and tried again. “Why didn’t we ask for more land? Wouldn’t that maximize the future benefit to us.”

Bethany snapped back at her, “Who is *us*?”

“Native Americans.”

“Trying to maximize for the survival of Native Americans *alone* led to predictive outcomes that were non-optimal for Native Americans. Mostly, trying to get more of anything for Native Americans led to greater likelihood of lots of people dying. If no changes to the founding law are made, the North American land mass will endure a five hundred thirty-six year dark age, with near-constant political tyranny, disease and low average lifespan. If you make these amendments to the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the dark age on the North American land mass will be reduced to one hundred and four years.” Bethany held down the transmit button for a long time after talking, making it impossible for Mika to respond. The ham operator on the other side must’ve pointed it out to her because the channel cleared after almost a minute of listening to Bethany breathe into the microphone.

“Why is that?” Mika transmitted.

Bethany grumbled audibly into the microphone. She didn’t attempt to conceal her irritation. “*Why* is not a computer question. As I’ve told you many times, Glinda has no idea *why* probabilities manifest the way they do.

She incorporates past regressions into predictive models and runs billions, sometimes trillions, of variable alternatives and flags optimal outcomes. Do you want *me* to guess *why*, because she can't."

Mika keyed the mic. "Yes. Please guess. Why don't any of these suggestions advance the cause of Native Americans?"

"Because when you think in terms of *us and them* you fuck everyone in North America."

Bethany was getting angry. Joe had seen and heard it before. Soon, she'd abandon the conversation. Bethany didn't actually give a shit what they did with the list of amendments.

"One more question," Mika rushed. "Can we make some changes to the wording?"

"Yes," Bethany replied. "If you want thousands, maybe *millions* more people to suffer and die and add centuries to the dark age, do whatever you want. I have to go poop in the bathroom. Goodbye."

After the unhelpful radio conversation, Mika returned to her combat training and Joe went home to stew. He ended up day-drinking a quarter bottle of bourbon. Now it was late afternoon and he needed to make a decision. Should he bet all his personal credibility on the six amendments or not?

The half-page of scrawl set out five changes to the Constitution and one change to the Fourteenth Amendment. In the last three hours, Joe had read them at least thirty times.

It might've been the bourbon, but he began to see a glimmer of genius in Sagehen's method. Her AI never considered *why* to make a particular change in the wording of the law. The computer had no agenda. It knew none of the "sacred cows" of legal philosophy. The computer measured outcomes in terms of survivability and average lifespan. It was, quite possibly, brilliant. Humans cared more about *why* than they cared about how. The AI couldn't give a shit about either. It cared about results.

When Joe considered his long life and his many successes through the hazy lens of liquor, he saw a pattern emerge. Cooperation was the “big deal.” It was the ultimate human technology. Sagehen had condemned he and Mika for “us and them thinking.” If cooperation was a superpower, “us and them thinking” was Kryptonite.

Sagehen had predicted the Black Autumn collapse. Because of that alone, Bethany and her AI could not be written off. Even a broken watch was right twice a day—the saying went—but Sagehen predicted the collapse of almost everything. When she said a dark age was coming, it had to be taken seriously.

Joe kept Sagehen’s existence a secret from all but Mika and his friend with the Shoshone-Bannock tribe. Joe and his granddaughter used smoke and mirrors to warn the rest of the native tribes about the possibility of a global crash. Based on their word, many of the tribes took measures to reinforce their emergency preparedness. When the world came crashing down, Joe and Mika were damn-near prophets among the Native Americans. They could get away with murder at this point.

Convincing the President of the United States was a whole ‘nother hog to saddle. Joe would have to convince the most powerful man in the world to get behind changing the most sacred document in the land. There were several legal steps to amending the Constitution. Without the support of the president, the process would never get off the ground.

Joe looked out his plate glass window toward the ugly, black highway and the purple mountains beyond. This was the grandpappy of all poker games, and fate had plunked him down between a surly computer genius on one side and a haunted U.S. president on the other.

He felt like a half-blind trickster juggling rattlesnakes over a playpen full of cooing babies.

Joe clutched the wrinkled paper. He sipped the last slosh in the bottom of his glass. He looked at himself, reflected in the glass of his window. His eyes

sparkled like a much younger man.

Dutch McAdams crossed the street with the setting sun behind him.

"*Show time,*" Joe Whiterock whispered to himself.

DUTCH DROPPED hard into Joe Whiterock's couch. He took the proffered glass of bourbon, sipped it, leaned back and closed his eyes. He hated the setup to this negotiation. Whiterock was going to ask him for something, and it'd be something he wouldn't want to give. He had no leverage whatsoever. On second thought, this wasn't a negotiation at all. It was a shakedown.

"These are our conditions to provide you fighting men." Whiterock handed President McAdams a crumpled sheet of paper.

Dutch skimmed the page, then jerked his head up. His eyes must've bugged a little because the old Indian barked a laugh.

"You're asking me to amend the Constitution?" He rubbed the tweaked muscle in his neck like he was kneading a pizza. *This was bullshit of the highest order.*

Joe didn't answer. He stood and sipped his bourbon with a blank face. He was dressed in slacks and a white collared shirt, his thick salt and pepper hair swept back like a helmet. He looked every inch the statesman, like he'd dressed for this meeting—as though his request would be taken seriously.

Dutch hunched over the crinkled page and read the hand-written list again. With every line, he felt more bone-weary. He became pitifully aware that he looked and smelled like an old man who'd spent a day in the south forty. Dutch remembered when he used to take demands like this from foreign dignitaries behind his battleship-heavy desk in the Oval Office. There was something to be said for the trappings of power.

Now, he was sore, filthy and full of sadness. He was a refugee in his own country. A guest of strange people. His family was vulnerable. He'd traded

his hulking desk for a nomad's trailer. The page before him was an insult to a once-great nation. The proposed amendments were a mishmash of half-baked ideas on social engineering, taxation, voting rights and interstate commerce. He didn't have the energy to untangle them. In any case, even the notion of six amendments was beyond the pale—too much to ask. Dutch gathered himself and stood.

"No. And *never*." He clinked the barely-touched glass of bourbon on the coffee table, let the page fall next to the glass, grabbed up his battle belt, and walked out the door, standing as straight and tall as he could manage.

THE NIGHT HAD ALREADY DIPPED below freezing, and the dry air stung Dutch's lungs as he stormed up the gravel road toward the two bedroom trailer the Sho-Pais had loaned his family. The sun had disappeared behind the mountains and the weak light ran the color of dirty dishwater.

How dare they turn their greedy eyes to the Constitution. Dutch had sworn to "preserve, protect and defend" every syllable. He would hand over a dozen nuclear codes before he supported a single line to be altered.

The natives were a people without oath to the sacred charter of the United States. He and his family might just as well have taken refuge in Mexico or French Polynesia. The natives were not the allies he thought them to be. They were not the Americans who elected him. The page Joe Whiterock handed him had proved it.

If they'd asked for more land, or demanded reparations, or even insisted on more entitlements, it would've been something to consider. But to monkey with the Constitution particularly to this degree—it was an astonishing display of disrespect; it was spit in the eye of every man and woman who'd died to defend America.

From a block away, Dutch saw the ugly, white light of the solar lantern

over the kitchenette in his trailer home. Sharon worked over a camp stove, probably heating a can of chili in anticipation of Dutch's return.

He remembered handing the briefcase to Sam Greaney in Air Force One. When Greaney took hold of the case, his chest puffed, his spine curved and his eyes hardened. In that moment, he dominated Dutch. He'd devoured his manhood and swallowed his personal honor whole. When Greaney took the codes, he'd destroyed Dutch's legacy. He'd reduced Sharon, the kids and the presidency of the United States. The magnitude of Dutch's dishonor was difficult to overstate. Rarely had one man been so wholly consumed by another man—past, present and future.

When Dutch said "never" to Joe Whiterock, what he'd really been saying was "never again."

In his soul, as muddled as the last light of day, Dutch McAdams found a glimmer of purpose. He would defend the Constitution against all threats, foreign and domestic.

MIKA'S GRANDFATHER was wearing a dress shirt, which threw her mind into a whirring, backward calculation of probability. The more she lived in the shadow of Sagehen, the more she saw the world like an old fashioned watch ticking backward. Mika ran her own regression analysis, triggered by the dress shirt, and reached a conclusion. Her grandfather had proposed the amendments to Dutch McAdams.

She didn't have a problem with that, since the Constitution had been far from perfect all along.

"You gave them to him, didn't you?" Mika asked her grandfather.

"Ayup."

"How'd he react?"

"Like I asked him to sell me his wife."

Mika nodded. Sometimes, it took a moment to put herself in the shoes of white people. She understood their ways of thinking almost better than she understood First People, but she'd never once choked up while singing the national anthem or watching fireworks on the Fourth of July. She didn't feel the same awe at fields of white crosses or the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. That was *their stuff. Their* history and culture.

For two hundred fifty years the land had been dominated by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but that period felt like an interlude to her. A time to be waited out.

Mika wept over the Trail of Tears and the genocide of the Aztec by the Spanish Conquistadors. She felt a flag-waving pride when she studied the seasonal foraging round of the Paiutes, or when she attended the gathering of the piñon pine nuts and the digging of the camas root. She felt her heart swell at circle dances and the telling of the story of Sagehen and the Great Coyote.

"Did he give you an answer?" Mika wanted specifics. There would be steps to the amendment process, but the support of the president would be needed first.

"Ayup. He said no." Her grandfather sipped the dark splash in his glass.

"Do we take the list to the native congress anyway?" She wondered aloud.

"We're going to have to tell some of them about the AI," Joe said.

"They're going to want to meet Bethany."

Her grandfather chuckled. "We're dead in the water if that happens. But it's not a problem. We can work around it."

"Maybe," she said. Travel was so difficult, the Native American Congress would probably be satisfied with an explanation over the ham radio. They wouldn't likely ask to see the AI function.

"How's playing soldier?" Her grandfather changed the subject.

"We're learning. The president—Dutch, is actually a good leader. None of us knew anything about tactics, but we're getting there through trial and

error.”

“You’re under his command? I think President McAdams is upset with us after tonight. You might feel some heatwaves coming off him.”

Mika shrugged. She respected Dutch McAdams for his leadership skill but her awe for his elected position pretty much ended there.

“What’s his son like?” Her grandfather changed the subject again.

She hesitated. “Teddy?”

Her grandfather cocked his head and gave her “the look.”

“Yeah.” She waved her hands like swatting at gnats. “He’s fine; kind of a poster child for white privilege. Still, he soldiers well enough.”

“Ayup,” her grandfather made his standard reply. “And?”

“And, nothing.” She flustered. “What do you want me to say? He’s a standard college boy. He’s still a little messed up, I think, about those guys cutting off his finger. Either that or the collapse is bumming him out. He probably misses his video games.”

“Wow.”

“Wow, what?” He liked to throw out one-syllable replies to keep her talking. Old dog. Old tricks.

“Sounds like you’ve got an eye on the young man—you’re working through some issues with him. Hmm?” He held his bourbon glass up against his forehead as though it might transfer some genie wisdom through his skull.

“Quiet, Grandpa. It always comes back to marriage with you, doesn’t it? With the whole world flapping in the wind, you’d trade everything to see me get hitched and pregnant, wouldn’t you?”

“Ayup,” he answered. “My granddaughter is the key to the future, and I don’t mean that as a platitude, my trout.”

She could feel her face redden, but it wasn’t in anger. His love warmed her. After she lost her mom and dad, her grandfather became her world. He was a trickster of an old goat, but she adored him.

“I’m never going to date Teddy McAdams, so you can put that thought

out of your devious little mind."

"It's the end of the world," he argued.

"He's a Republican, he's privileged, he's East Coast," she said, ticking off his obvious flaws on her fingers.

"His *father's* Republican, his *father's* privileged, and they're actually from California High Sierras. Shoshone land." Her grandfather crossed his arms.

Mika chuckled. "You're hoping to cement your next geo-political alliance with a marriage. I know how you think, Grandpa. You'll throw me into the deal when the right prince comes along. The president's son shows up and you're already counting the dowry."

Her grandfather laughed. "I could never get anything past you. You're too smart by half. Yes, it's true: Sharon McAdams and I have arranged the marriage. It's all worked out."

She looked at him side-eye. "I'm not one hundred percent sure you're joking."

He shrugged and shook his head. "All I told her was that you were the smartest girl in post-graduate studies at UCLA and a runner-up for the Miss Native American pageant. Things gathered speed after that."

"Oh gawd, grandfather. Please tell me you didn't tell her about the pageant. Sharon McAdams is an accomplished woman. She has a Phd. You didn't tell her I was a beauty queen, did you?"

He looked like a jackrabbit who wandered into the fire circle. "What? I can't brag about my granddaughter? It's plainly obvious that you're a beauty queen. Anyone can see that."

Mika slumped on the couch and put her head in her hands. She goofed at being mortified. It was good fun to have her grandfather against the ropes for bragging her up to the First Lady of the United States. It washed away some of the terror of the apocalypse and the threats that ringed them. After all her education and activism, nothing felt more right than when her grandfather

fawned over her.

She looked up and smiled. His eyes went from cautious to relieved. He downed the last of his liquor.

“Grandfather, I’m not interested in the president’s son. The daughter...maybe.”

Her grandfather’s eyes went wide with panic. “Are you telling me something?”

She couldn’t keep a straight face. “No. I’m joking. I’m normative cisgendered.”

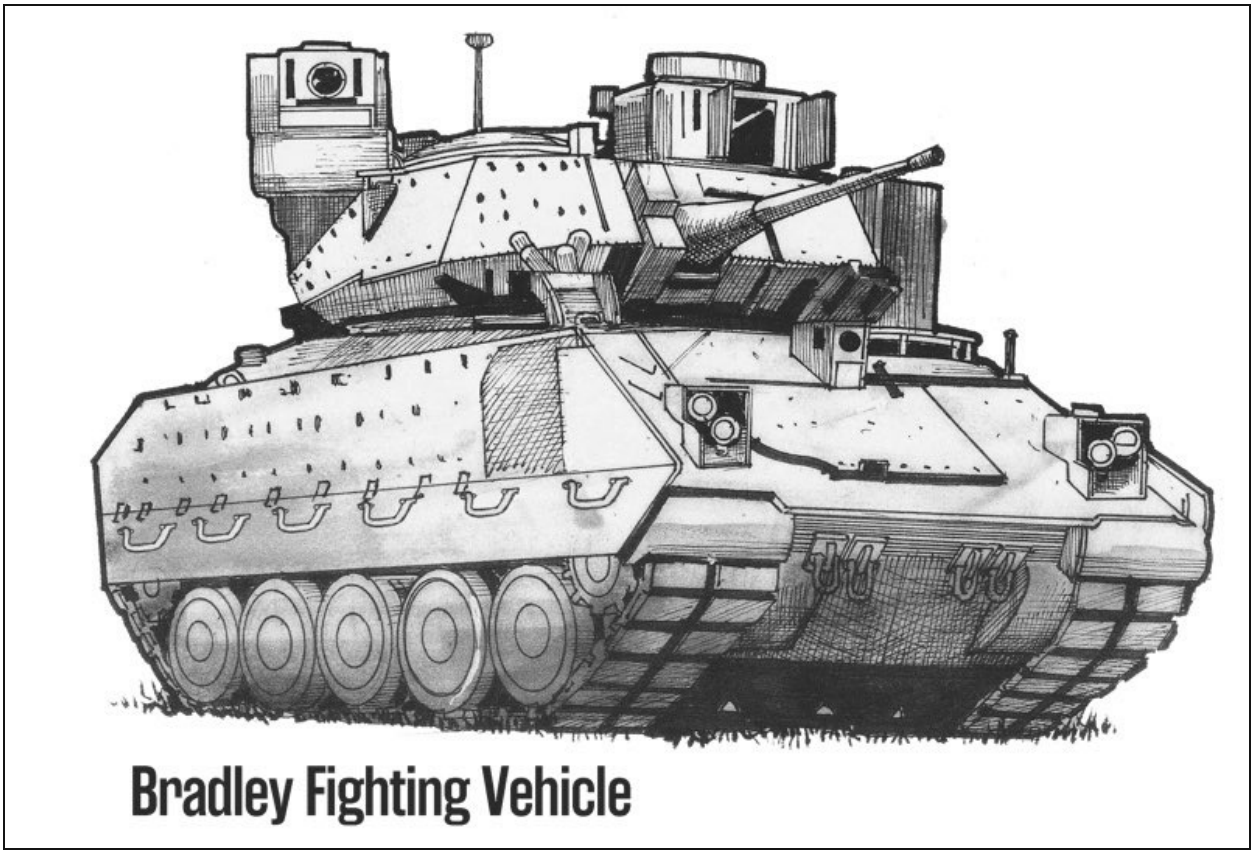
“I have no idea what that means.”

“It means you might have grandchildren someday—since that seems to be all you care about.”

He covered his relief with a joke. “Guilty as charged. All I want from the years I have left is to see little Whiterocks bouncing around the homestead. Five or six of them at minimum.”

“I guess I better get busy on that.” She clapped her hands and stood up from the couch. “Tomorrow, I get knocked up. I best get some sleep tonight.” She kissed her grandfather on the cheek and dragged herself down the hallway to bed.

4



Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

Datapoint, current: Russian paratroopers search for United States

nuclear codes at 42.850542, -115.715801.

Datapoint, current: Chinese warships arrive in port at Honolulu and Kahului, Hawaii.

Datapoint, current: United States fields no federal military.

Posited outcome: Russians achieve full control of Minuteman III nuclear arsenal of the United States.

Query: predict actions of the Russian Federation.

Bethany and Glinda had more data on western countries than on the Chinese. They didn't store as much data, plus they lacked "carbon neutral" office buildings like the United States and Western Europe. There weren't as many commercial data sources in China, and Glinda the Good Witch didn't have access to Chinese government databases. She'd hacked the Russian government, but the Chinese had cut off all connectivity thirty-three hours *prior* to the crash of the American stock market.

That bit of data—that the Chinese had anticipated the crash of western civilization—seemed like it should be important, but Bethany weighed it against the discomfort of discussing it with Mika and Joe and decided to keep it to herself.

Because of the lack of video feeds, financial records and government acquisition patterns, Glinda would have to base the latest query on general historical models as opposed to an agent-by-agent mass data model.

In other words, Glinda wouldn't know what each, individual Chinese bureaucrat might decide, given a certain stimuli. Glinda would base her

models on general sweeps of probability. It skewed the accuracy almost thirteen percent down in terms of reliability, but it would still be a directionally useful prediction.

Glinda had a more-personal grasp on the Russians than the Chinese. She'd accessed most government files and data sources, including an astounding repository of surveillance camera footage controlled by the Russian mafia. She knew the decision-makers better than their own wives knew them—probably better than they knew themselves.

Glinda returned an answer to the query after only three hours.

Predicted subsequent actions: Russian nuclear strike from the United States territory on Chinese military concentrations along western and south-eastern Russian borders.

Predicted objective: Russian seizure of coal and oil fields abutting Kazakhstan and Siberia. Elimination of 48.8% of the Chinese land-based military.

Reliability: 84.347%.

DUTCH MCADAMS HAD REFUSED Joe Whiterock's request. Even so, the Sho-Pai Indians were preparing for the recon mission to Wyoming. It made no sense to Dutch. He didn't understand Native Americans. Their negotiation style was to tell a man what they wanted, then ignore his refusal.

If Dutch accepted the Sho-Pai's help for the recon mission, would they think he'd agreed to their terms? It didn't matter; he needed to see if the Russians were meddling with American nukes.

Dutch trudged to Joe Whiterock's house and banged on his door.

Joe answered in a T-shirt.

Dutch jumped right to the point, through the screen door. "So you're helping us anyway?"

Joe held up a fat, white mug. "Good morning, Mr. President. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Dutch blinked back his embarrassment. He'd been rude. He'd intruded on the man's breakfast. "Sure. I'll take it black, thank you." Joe held the door open for Dutch to pass.

"Would you like some eggs? They're fresh from Mrs. Flint's henhouse. They taste a ton better than store-bought." Joe chuckled. "As though there are any store-bought eggs left, right?"

"Thank you, eggs sound wonderful." Dutch had already eaten Spam and beans for breakfast, but he wouldn't refuse the man's hospitality. Pausing for a second breakfast would make him late for the FTX that morning—another roadblock assault drill—but Brooks would understand. He would put Mika, Dutch's 2IC in charge of the squad.

Despite the rugged, mountain surroundings and the casual breakfast, Dutch reminded himself that this was a negotiation with a neighboring nation. Native Americans kept their own counsel, and Dutch needed to stop thinking of them as part of his electorate. They didn't owe him anything.

While Joe cooked eggs in a big, cast-iron frying pan, he meandered back to the cause of Dutch's agitation. "Sir, as far as Duck Valley reservation is concerned, you're our guests and we're your friends. Your fight is our fight."

"That's very generous of you considering..." Dutch couldn't think of how to put it delicately.

"Considering how the whites drove us off our land?" Joe said. "That was a long time ago. You didn't drive me off of anything. It's a new day for men of good will."

Dutch cocked his head. This wasn't how negotiations between countries

usually went. The old Indian was ahead of the curve and Dutch had fallen behind. *What was he missing?*

Joe nodded. “I think you’re right about the Russians. I think they’re here to hurt us—to desecrate the land while we’re face down in the sand. This effects us all.” He slid an egg onto a plate in front of Dutch, then added another precious egg beside it. He dug a fork out of a drawer and placed it on a napkin beside the plate.

It felt like a peace offering.

Joe Whiterock was an elder of uncommon wisdom, and it made Dutch feel like a rookie. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d shamed himself by charging over to his house unannounced.

“You’re sending Sho-Pai fighters but no one, yet, from the other tribes?” Dutch cut up an egg with his fork. The yolk spilled across the plate, a rich, dark orange.

“I can’t speak for the other tribes—not even the rest of the Paiute. They’re waiting on your decision.” Joe glanced away.

Dutch finished his bite. “I’m sorry, but my answer stands. I swore an oath to defend the Constitution and nothing can change that. If I broke my oath and supported a grab bag of amendments, then I wouldn’t be president and you’d be negotiating with a traitor.”

Whiterock nodded. “I see. Look at it from our perspective: the tribes have little reason to expose themselves to threats outside our boundaries. I need to give them a reason.”

“Ask them for new conditions,” Dutch said. “There are plenty of other negotiating points: land, cultural rights, pipelines, sports team names...”

Joe laughed. “Those were the days, weren’t they? When racist sports team names were a cause?” He reached out a hand and rested it on Dutch’s forearm. “We have all the land we can handle now, and our cultural rights aren’t being encroached upon anymore. The mechanized farms are quiet. The property owners are disappearing. Banks are gone. Paper deeds to the land

will be held by ghosts. The pipelines are empty and the sports teams are...well, probably not an issue anymore. Please reconsider our request. Our only concern is for the future of everyone."

Dutch sat back. The president could no more amend the Constitution than he could order Mexico to ban tequila. Changing a single word of the Constitution required a two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress, then a three-fourths ratification of the state legislatures. Joe Whiterock knew that already. He wanted Dutch to endorse the amendments, but that was the last thing he'd do. Dutch believed in the Constitution. He believed that God laid hands on the document when it was written. He wasn't going to sell out, not for any army, and certainly not to make a new friend happy.

After a pregnant pause, Joe slapped the countertop. "You're a man of honor. Maybe the decline of modern civilization and the decline of honor went hand-in-hand. Maybe the way forward is for men of honor to choose their line and stand their ground. But..." Joe ran his fingers through his hair, "sometimes that means taking a second look at sacred cows. The trick is knowing when a cow is truly sacred, right?"

Dutch didn't answer. The native was implying that the Constitution might not be sacred, which was easy for him to say. Joe hadn't sworn an oath to defend it. He hadn't sent men to die in defense of that document.

"For some of us, it's not a piece of paper. It's not a sacred cow. It's bedrock." Dutch's voice came out flat and husky.

Joe held up his hands in surrender. "I don't mean to offend. We're on the same side. We would both sacrifice anything to prevent the land from being desecrated by the Russians." The implication was obvious; that Dutch should be willing to risk the Constitution to protect the land and save the people.

Dutch pushed back from the countertop. "Thank you for the delicious eggs. You were right: they're better than store-bought. At least eggs are better in the apocalypse." He smiled, but the smile didn't make him feel better. He waved a meandering goodbye and showed himself out.

Training was to be suspended while they kitted up for their trip to Wyoming, so Dutch headed home.

He felt backed into a corner. The natives held all the cards. They were playing chicken with the fate of millions in order to extract six weird concessions from a half-baked president. No matter how much Joe prattled with carefully chosen words, it was a pissing contest. The Native Americans were scratching something back, and they didn't seem to care that the clock was ticking.

The day would soon come when they'd look up to see missile contrails overhead. If the Russians wanted nukes, they wanted them for a reason. Mushroom clouds would appear around the horizon, and the sky would flash an alien green. The earth would groan. The wind would carry sickness and death—beta particles sifting down to kill the animals and corrupt the streams. Bits of irradiated ash would take up residence in the peoples' lungs and cook their bodies from inside-out. Nobody knew how long it'd take the Russians to crack the code on the launch systems, but they wouldn't give up until they did—Dutch felt certain.

He needed to see the Russians in the missile fields for himself. He needed to show the natives how dangerous and implacable those Russian bastards could be. Maybe a hard dose of reality would turn Joe Whiterock and the natives away from their slow-motion car wreck. Maybe death should come to the Sho-Pai partisans, with Dutch and his son beside them. Maybe that was what it would take for them to face facts. It wouldn't be the first time body bags moved an alliance forward.

Dutch ground his teeth and leaned into the cold wind. This time, for once, the president would be present with the soldiers to pay the price in flesh. Maybe if he died in battle with them, they'd cease hand-wringing and save the land.

Perhaps that was Dutch's path: to salvage his legacy by blood.

MIKA WHITEROCK HAD BEEN PLACED in charge of gathering shelter for the partisans for their mission to Wyoming. The Idaho Guardsmen went north to collect vehicles from Boise. When they returned, the Sho-Pai platoon would travel to Warren Air Force base, across the snow-locked spine of the great mountains.

There was no getting around the reality of snow, now that December had ushered in the winter. They would spend Christmas on the road, and it'd take more than luck to get them through the mountain passes. They'd need snow plows.

The decision had been made to avoid Salt Lake City. If the metropolis was anything like the rest of the country, it could swallow their unit up in criminal violence. Instead, they'd stick to the back roads for the 700 mile journey. The strings of small towns might slow them, but they had the President of the United States as their letter of safe passage, and the light armor of the Idaho National Guard to back him up. They hoped to cover fifty miles a day and reach the Air Force base in two weeks.

Mika stacked tents outside the high school when a line of Humvees and small tanks rumbled into town from the direction of Mountain Home, Idaho. The guardsmen were back.

Teddy McAdams stepped out of the gym and stood beside her to watch the vehicles roll down the highway. She had work to do but he obviously wanted to talk, so she put words to her frustration.

"I thought this is supposed to be a reconnaissance mission," Mika said. She hated the idea of combat. The National Guard tanks made her feel less safe rather than more.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Maybe the armor is for getting through roadblocks, not fighting Russians."

"Will the Russians have people watching the roads into Cheyenne?" she

asked. “That’s what I’d do.” The sun poked through the shield of clouds, and she shaded her eyes. There were ten Humvees and six light tanks. “Won’t they notice if we drive up in tanks.”

“They’re called Bradley Fighting Vehicles,” he corrected. “They’re not tanks.”

“Did you learn that from a video game?” she said. The words escaped her mouth before she could stop them. *Damn, I’m bitchy this morning*, she thought.

Teddy McAdams didn’t answer immediately. “Well, yeah. I learned that from a video game. Also, I spent a half-day with the National Guard when I signed up for the ROTC.”

“You joined the military?” she asked with surprise.

“Just the ROTC. I was going to enlist in the Army when I finished my undergrad. Then this happened.” He waved his hand at the vehicles rolling into the high school parking lot. “If you don’t mind, please keep the enlistment thing to yourself. I didn’t tell my mom or dad. Things tend to get political with them.”

“Political?” she asked. “You don’t want to *get political* with your parents? How’s that even possible?”

“My dad campaigned partially on being the World’s Greatest Dad, or whatever. If I’d told him about the ROTC or that I decided to enlist, there would’ve been a whole to-do about it. Photographers, interviews, ya know? I just wanted to serve. I’d had enough of video games and frat parties.” His thumb rubbed the stump of his missing finger.

“What were you studying?” She felt bad for her sharp words now that he’d confided in her. She came off as an angry feminist more than she liked.

He laughed and swiped an unruly curl of blond hair out of his eyes. “I was a French major. That oughta come in handy, right?”

Mika thought about saying, *we might get back to Paris someday.* Then she remembered Sagehen’s predictions. “If it makes you feel any better, you

dodged a bullet with the U.S. military. Around here, you'll hear a different side to that story. Natives aren't big fans of the U.S. Army."

Teddy turned to her. "How do you feel about that?" She noticed for the first time how his eyes danced somewhere between green and amber. He must've been a hot commodity among the sorority girls in Boston—*a Mac Daddy. A Tinder Trendsetter.*

She wasn't going to tiptoe around questions of white history, not when she was talking to the president's son. Mika answered, "The white man's army did the same stuff to indigenous people that the Nazis did to the Jews. That's the history they don't talk about."

"That's pretty much what I learned in American History," he said.

"And you still wanted to join the Army?" Her hands landed on her hips like drumbeats. *Da-dum.*

Teddy's brows scrunched then relaxed. He was probably the kind of guy who side-stepped questions of race and oppression rather than confronting the hard questions about social justice. A lurker. A lukewarm moderate, at best.

"I wanted to serve my country," he said. "and I still do."

She glanced again at his missing finger. It was the little one on the left hand. The stump had healed over. They cut it off near the base instead of the knuckle. His hand looked off-center and disfigured.

She couldn't help but argue, even with this wounded boy. The struggle was always there in her gut, churning like a hot cocktail of worry. If she wasn't part of the solution, she was part of the problem, she told herself. Mika was not a lurker.

But was all that over? Hadn't her career as an activist been obliterated? Her doubt agitated her, almost as though if she won this argument, she could have it all back.

She pressed her point. "It is time to start over. The country you wanted to serve wasn't ever going to paint over its dirty history. They took this land by

force and then they tried to make good on it. Could they ever do that? Make a moral nation from immoral actions?"

His eyes widened, like a puppy being yelled at for peeing on the couch. He might've had a reasonable answer to her challenge, but very few people were willing to match her intensity.

"I guess that depends," he spoke softly. "Were your people moral?"

"What do you mean?" She'd never heard this particular comeback, and she thought she'd heard them all.

He stammered, "I don't want to offend, but I never studied it. Were Native Americans generally peaceful, or did they take land from one another?"

"I mean, some tribes—most tribes really—fought to preserve, defend—they, they..." she stuttered. Mika knew fewer specifics about inter-tribal warfare than she knew about the United States' extermination of the natives. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she remembered the Sioux had been driven out of their lands by another tribe—Ojibwe, she thought. Then the Sioux had driven others out of their land in the Dakotas.

"A lot of the tribes were peaceful," she rallied. "They were content to remain on their land and live in a natural cycle with the earth."

"When you say 'a lot,' what percentage of tribes do you mean?" He ran his fingers through his hair just like his father did.

She felt the blood rush to her face. She hoped her honeyed skin covered it. In all her years studying Native American history and culture, she'd never heard anyone ask that question: what percentage of Native American tribes were peaceful and what percentage took land from other tribes? It wasn't a difficult question, but it wasn't the kind of question that was asked. Nobody talked about native culture in those terms—and to her knowledge, nobody had submitted it to history.

"Well, I don't know an exact percentage, but this tribe—the Shoshone-Paiutes—were pretty peaceful."

“When you say ‘pretty peaceful,’ what percentage of the time were they at war with other tribes?”

“Um.” She stopped to think. He seemed to be asking a genuine question, but it felt like she was being herded into a corner. Teddy came off as an *aww-shucks* blond beta male, but his questions had a knife-edge relentlessness, and he steadily drove her toward a conclusion she didn’t like. She preferred to focus on the fact that his forefathers had pushed her forefathers into a deserted corner of their homeland.

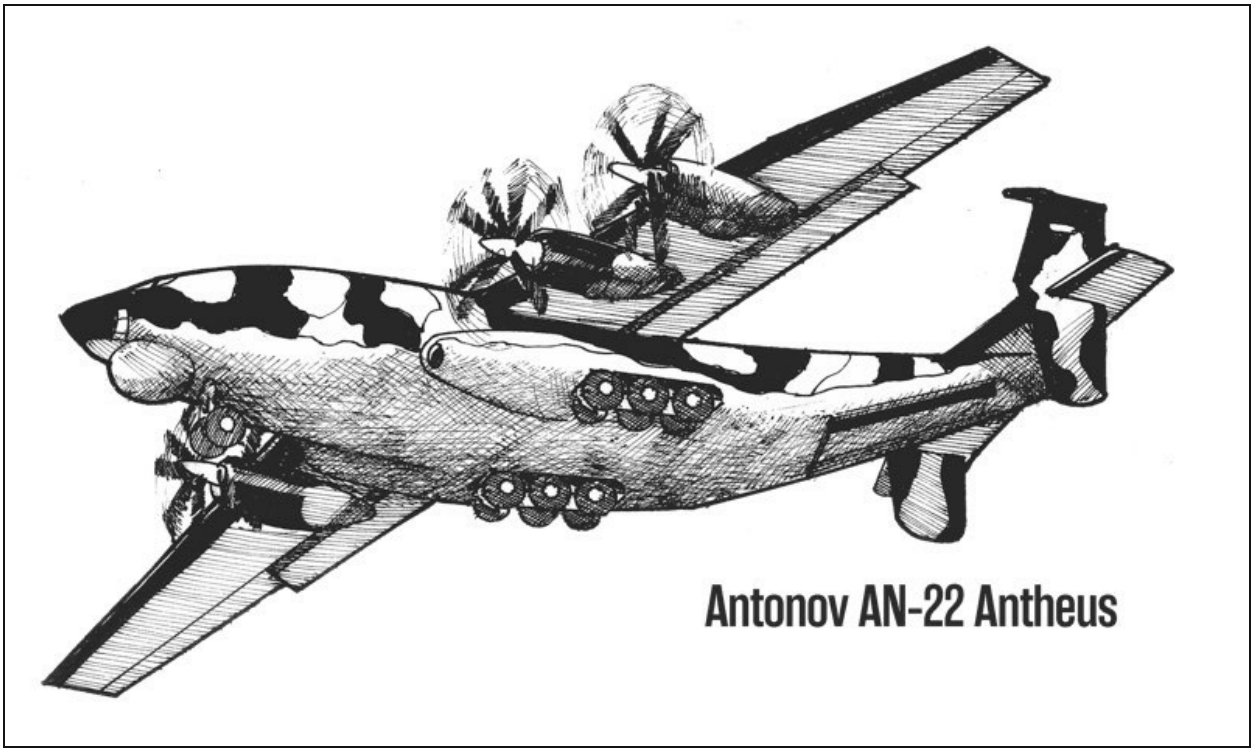
“I don’t appreciate the game you’re playing,” she said. “We’re talking about people who perished as refugees. We’re talking about dead children, and pregnant mothers, burned to death in their shelters.”

He leaned back against the waves of her ferocity. “I’m...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.” He shoved his hands in his fatigue pockets.

“You do your research and *then* we can talk about who was immoral. Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do.” She turned back to the stack of tents. She decided to set them all up—every last tent—to make sure they were serviceable. It’d require hours and give her time to burn off her anger.

Sometime while she worked, Teddy wandered away.

5



Holbrook farmhouse
2 miles south of Albin, Wyoming

Vitaly Matovnikov didn't mind that he and his unit were there to unleash nuclear hell. He'd long ago grown accustomed to the edge of the Russian compulsion to seize advantage when it presented itself. What he

despised was his own vodka-scented laziness. He refused to end his career in Spetsnaz as a decrepit sniper. At almost forty years old, this would be his last mission and he needed to do something remarkable. In the meantime, he made himself as comfortable as possible. Old habits died hard.

The roof of the farmhouse was the highest point for three miles in every direction, and that put his sniper perch only seven meters above ground. He scanned the yard for lumber. The snow covered everything in a featureless, rolling, white blanket. If he could dig out enough wood and screws, he could build a proper platform. Maybe he'd get fancy and disguise it as a dormer off the roofline of the farmhouse.

Improving his sniper hides was one of his pastimes. It felt like building a clubhouse as a kid, only with greater purpose and a lot more time. He was a professional and would relentlessly execute on the mission, but between those rare bursts of action, he valued a good chair, a level floor and a warm hearth.

Come to think of it, he'd just as soon drink coffee and make the "geckos" dig through the snow to find the boards. As a Spetsnaz sniper, he was senior to everyone except the officers. Every man on this mission to America was Spetsnaz, on one level or another, but a "new guy" was still a gecko until another new guy came along. Out here in the sticks, on a Listening Post/Observation Post—LP/OP—everyone but he and the lieutenant was a gecko. The other senior soldiers were back in the Wyoming town of Albin enjoying proper indoor heating.

Vitaly didn't mind the cold. Wyoming had nothing on his home village in terms of snow and ice. He could lay outside, on this slanted roof, day and night. So long as his flask didn't run dry, he was good. To spread out under the stars, dead center in the middle of the United States of America, felt magical. It was like wanting a beautiful girl since kindergarten, then coming home from a middle school twenty year reunion and finding her naked in your apartment.

Russia had won. America lay open to her. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, when he was a kid, it looked like Russia would never be anything more than a failed nation—infested with fat mafiosos, a second-class army and a half-sinking navy.

Now, America had collapsed under the weight of its weak sadness. Their money and technology made them soft. The village of Albin, Wyoming had hardly barked when Vitaly and his platoon of paratroopers dropped into their fields and patrolled down their streets. His unit took some small arms fire that first week, but then the resistance quieted. They'd been ordered to leave the locals alone, insomuch as that was possible. Vitaly and his team had no problem finding abandoned homes and shops to occupy.

Ancient Antonov AN-22 transports began their perilous landing sorties on the long, straight highways running in and out of Albin. The Russian brass had brought the old prop planes out of mothballs for this mission—landing men, cargo and armor on American highways.

Two weeks after the collapse of the American stock exchange, Spetsnaz soldiers from all branches had been organized into the biggest paratroop mission in the history of the Russian military. They began by taking an abandoned American airfield in the Aleutian island chain. Then they moved down Alaska and the Canadian coast—parachuting into civilian airfields and international airports, then landing on them with cargo jets. It was only this last leg of the supply chain that required the prop transport. The engineers fussed that the roadbeds would crack under the massive weight of the bigger, jet-powered birds. The final hop, from the Great Falls, Montana International Airport into the farmlands around three American Air Force bases, required dozens of trips. Landing directly on Air Force runways stood too great a chance of raising organized resistance. They stayed out of sight as long as possible.

They could've parachuted everything into Albin, but Vitaly knew from past experience: when you dropped equipment, no matter how well-packed, a

third of it broke. Better to land, nice and easy, even if the process looked like a vulture trying to land on a hair ribbon. The supply missions had tapered down to one a day. They had settled in and the hackers were hard at work figuring out the American missile launch system. Like every mission in his long career, the bulk of the work would be the waiting, and while he waited, he'd build himself a shooting nest.

Warren AFB was the weirdest air force base Vitaly had ever seen. For one thing, there were no airplanes. Warren AFB had its own airfield, but it was inside the city limits of Cheyenne. His unit had no reason to fuck with the city. Satellite imagery showed that the airfield and the town had gone to sleep. Very little moved on the roads, and nothing had disturbed the runways in a month. They preferred to leave it alone. His expeditionary unit headquartered in the tiny hamlet of Albin, sixty-five miles east of Cheyenne. There were no nuclear missile silos near Cheyenne anyway, so there was no reason to stir it up. After all, it was easier to pacify a town of sixty-five people than a city of sixty-five thousand.

In the edge-less, blank flatlands on the border of Wyoming and Nebraska, a hundred Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles hid in concrete gun barrels. But there was no one left to pull the trigger. The American president had gone down with his plane and his military had apparently gone home. When Vitaly and his paratrooper comrades stormed the Launch Control Centers, sprinkled across the fields around Albin, the buildings were empty.

Vitaly had expected high-tech, touchscreen displays and ruggedized security keypads. Instead, the launch control rooms looked like Russian tech —avocado-green computer racks and 1970 keyboards with thick, black buttons. Vitaly worried that hacking this sixty-year-old technology might not be as easy as they'd thought. Russian hackers were good at fiber-optic, high-speed internet hacks into millions of lines of code. Could they hack technology that was obsolete ten years before their fathers planted their half-

drunk semen in their mothers? Perhaps taking control of American nukes wouldn't be the "walk along the Volga" that Vitaly's commanding officer had bragged about. It'd been more than two weeks, and nobody was celebrating. The hackers were apparently still hacking.

That wasn't Vitaly's "sheep to screw," as they said. His job was to lay under the steel-gray clouds, occasionally being snowed-upon, and watch the barren plains with his binoculars. He worked two hours on and six hours off, in a three-shifts-a-day rotation. Another team in the farmhouse listened and triangulated radio transmissions.

The "listening" part of the LP/OP was the crux of their mission, now that it'd become apparent that the "army" of American citizen gun owners wasn't coming for them. This far from civilization, there weren't more than two hundred American citizens within thirty miles, and the locals had been fed a line of bullshit that Russians were only here under the Geneva Convention to "secure loose nuclear materiel." The translators claimed, to any American who would listen, that this was like the fall of the Soviet Union, when an international coalition helped Russia secure its own nukes. The intelligence guys were eager to spread the word, and Vitaly had seen them dance this jig many times before.

How do you know when an intelligence officer is lying? When wind's coming out his face.

That was the old joke, and there was a lot of wind coming out of the "brain locker" back in Albin. An entire squad of intelligence officers liaisoned with the locals, and that was a lot of brainpower for an explanation that could've been delivered, easily, with a bullet.

It was utter bullshit. Vitaly had reached his own conclusion: they would launch the American missiles the moment they could. Russian high command was up to something strategic, and Vitaly would probably never know precisely what that was, but he was nearly certain they'd nuke the Chinese military bases along the Sino-Russian border.

That wasn’t his problem. His job was to take off the tops of mens’ heads from seven hundred meters. His job wasn’t to know what was going on inside those heads. He could relax on his slanted rooftop and stare out at the endless nothing of the American heartland.

Right now, things were hard in his home district. Many had no bread. No potatoes. Thousands starved in the cities. Food riots swallowed Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Kazan. But the government held. The military wasn’t shaking apart—no more than normal, at least.

His parents were okay. They lived in a dacha community in Sisto-Palkino. They grew most of their own food in the summer, as was common outside the big cities. Dacha gardens provided half the food for all of Russia, and his parents lived at the source—amidst their tiny, but productive yard. When the cities shook with violence, his parents moved to the countryside.

Even in the Wyoming farmlands, most Americans were hungry. Some even begged Spetsnaz for food. Far from fighting them, many American farmers groveled at their feet. Most had grown feed corn for the stock yards and nothing for themselves.

Not all, Vitaly admitted. He could see the fire in the eyes of some few men—the eye-to-eye stare of the farmers with guns nearby and plenty of food in their cellar. For now, Vitaly and his unit had the Americans back-on-their-heels, but that could change in an instant.

They landed with paratroopers, then with tanks. Now, they occupied a few shops and some of the farm houses. Comparisons to the anti-Russian film, Red Dawn, were unavoidable. Vitaly had seen the Hollywood propaganda movie and he understood the American fantasy. Enjoyed it even.

But Red Dawn was filmed before satellite coverage, drones, thermal optics and radio triangulation. Vitaly grimaced as he imagined American teenagers attempting to engage Russian Spetsnaz troops like in the movie. In his long career, Vitaly had killed Muslims by the hundreds. Chechens too. Even a few Ukrainians. He would take no pleasure in killing hapless

American children, stumbling in a haze now that their coffee machines no longer worked—easily spotted in the forest with thermal optics and killed with hunter drones. But there was no “Red Dawn” here in Albin, Wyoming, and Vitaly enjoyed the quiet.

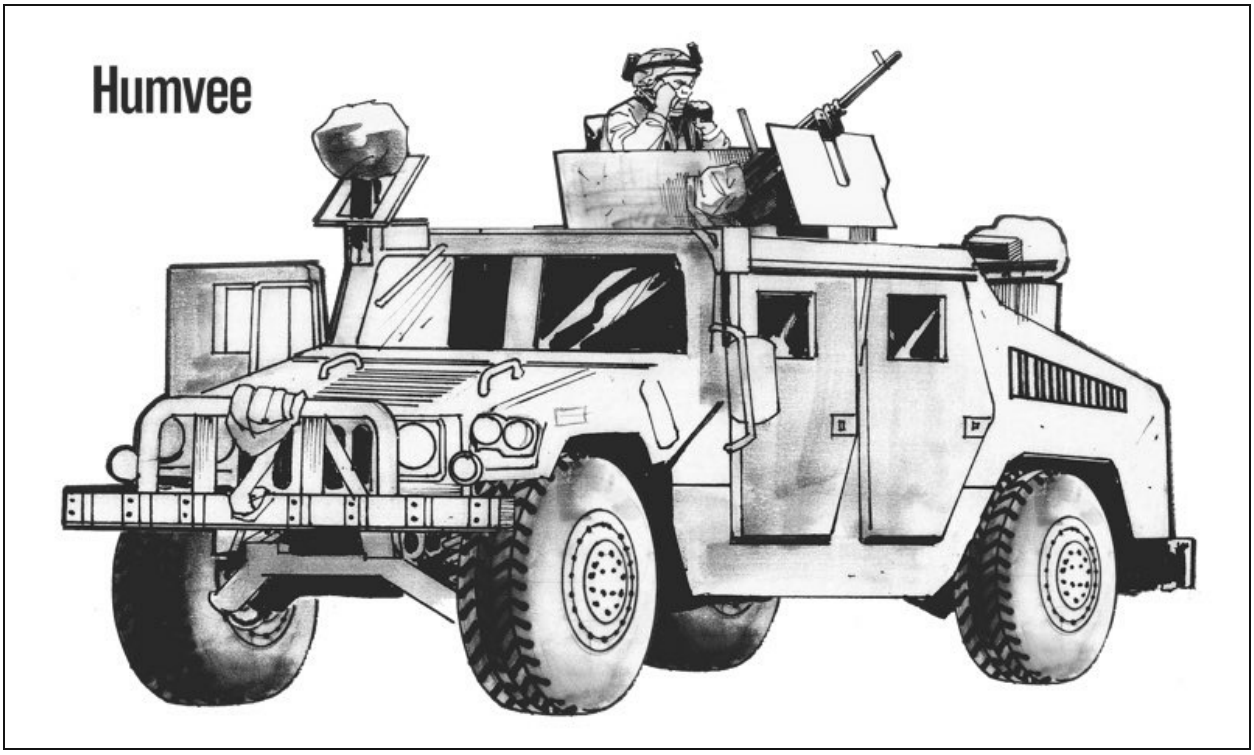
It wouldn’t last. He’d invaded enough countries to know. This was the pregnant pause, as the locals got over the shock of invasion. Soon the probes would begin—nighttime pot shots and men being killed when they wandered too far from their squad to piss. A week or two later, there would be ambushes, like the one that’d annihilated a company of Spetsnaz in Idaho and torched a BMD-3. Eventually, organized resistance would arise and the fires of war would burn.

They were two thousand Russian commandos afloat in a country of over 300 million strangers. More than 130 million Americans owned firearms. If even one percent of them mounted a counter-attack, the three battalions of Spetsnaz would be swallowed whole.

Vitaly doubted he’d ever see home again. With the crooked state of the world, he couldn’t picture the army shuttling he and his comrades back across the Aleutians.

Live or die, he was in America now.

6



Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

Query: length of predicted low-technology interlude between civilization.

Query: predicted lethal conflicts >10,000 deaths. Current date plus fifty years.

"Hey Bethany. How are you?" Mika asked over the radio.

"I'm fine," Bethany answered in the perfunctory voice she assumed when addressing the chores of human interaction.

"Good. I'm checking on the latest query we sent. We want a prediction about coming wars. We're worried about the Russians we found in Idaho."

"Of course. Standby while I pull it up..." Bethany looked at Glinda's results from the query for the first time and ran her finger along the text and read it in a drone-like voice into the microphone.

"Predicted low-technology dark age, 675 years in duration.

Predicted lethal conflicts in the next fifty years include:

U.S. survivors versus Russia, 57,000 dead.
U.S. survivors versus Northern Mexican Cartel, 12,000 dead.
U.S. survivors versus People's Republic of China, 56,000 dead.
U.S. survivors versus North American natives, 775,000 dead.
U.S. survivors versus Northern Michigan Restored Militia..."

"Break. Break. Break," Mika interrupted Bethany's reading. "United States survivors against Native Americans?"

"Yes." Bethany ran her finger along the line of text on the screen. "775,000 dead. That's the biggest lethal conflict in the prediction set."

"When does that happen?" Mika barked.

"I didn't ask Glinda for the dates of hostilities. I can have that for you in twenty hours."

"There are only five million Native Americans. How can almost twenty percent of them die in a war with the whites?"

Bethany scrunched her brows. "The query didn't ask for number of

deaths on one side of the conflict. You're assuming Native Americans constitute all deaths. Glinda counts deaths on both sides. The natives might be the ones massacring the whites. I can run a query of mortality by aggressor party..."

"No. I'm more interested in knowing *why*. Why do the whites and natives go to war? Is Glinda saying that without her changes to the U.S. Constitution we go to war with the whites?"

"Mika," Bethany interrupted, "The data doesn't describe *why* things happen, just what *will happen* within a degree of probability. Have you considered that it might be *because* the president refuses to endorse the amendments to the Constitution that war breaks out? Causality might flow from the fact that you asked him and he refused. But of course, you did ask him, so it's baked into the predictive model now."

"You told us to ask for those changes!" Mika shouted. The radio crackled.

Bethany reached across her desk and took a handful of dry cereal. She munched into the mic while she answered, "Correction. You asked for moderating solution sets to the five hundred year period of low-tech and Glinda provided the solution with the greatest probability to reduce the duration of human suffering, which was to make alterations to the founding law of the land—the Constitution. You didn't ask her if the president would agree to the changes, nor what would happen if he didn't. If you don't ask the question, how can Glinda answer it?"

Mika went silent on the other end of the radio.

Bethany continued transmitting, "Do you want me to run your new queries?"

"Hold up." Bethany sighed. "Every time I ask you a question about the future, I come away more confused. I need to speak to my grandfather. Did you say the coming dark age extends now even longer than five hundred years?"

“Um, yes. 675 years of low-technology, and the absence of Rule of Law on the North American continent—but that assumes the president refuses the changes, which is still an open inflection point.”

“No,” Mika disagreed. “He refuses to consider it.”

Bethany continued her original thought, “He’s still alive. Correct?”

“Yes. What of it?” Mika blew into her mic.

“All outcomes remain possible.”

“Thank you. I’m signing off,” Mika huffed.

Bethany knew she was right. She was always right, because she relied entirely upon data and probability. Probability didn’t lie. Data didn’t lie. Emotions lied—which was why she ignored them.

Bethany was not impressed by what people said. By observing hundreds of years of historical data, she knew that it wasn’t what people said that mattered.

It was what they did.

McAdams Residence
Duck Valley Reservation

DUTCH HAD BEEN CONDUCTING his morning privy and thinking about offering the Native Americans Yellowstone National Park when he heard commotion around the front of their double-wide trailer.

If he found a way to legally bequeath Yellowstone, maybe the natives would keep it a park and make money from tourism. Maybe they’d close it. Maybe it’d become a casino. *Which tribe would get it?* He couldn’t guess how they might work it out.

Seeing the dead lawn, Dutch remembered: there were no tourists to visit a park, and maybe there never would be again. Thinking about Yellowstone,

the waterfalls falling, the geysers gushing, the trails empty—all without Americans to see them—made Dutch moan with sadness. He used to love the idea of American families. He used to picture them pulling up to attractions in a station wagon and piling out with smiles straining their faces. In his imagination, they visited Yellowstone, The World's Biggest Ball of Yarn. Mount Rushmore.

Dutch had secretly dreamed of a monument to his leadership, after he was dead and his presidency was committed to the history books. Not Mount Rushmore, but maybe a college. Or a national park. He would've liked a place families might visit in a station wagon.

Would the natives trade for Yellowstone?

He felt a wave of irritation that an Indian had come to interrupt his morning, probably on political business.

"Mister President," Russell Yellowhorse called and waved from the low chain link gate in front of the president's doublewide trailer.

"Good morning, Russell." The president came around the side of the trailer, drying his hands with a towel.

"Good morning, sir," Russell smiled. A Blue Heeler puppy wriggled in his arms.

"You can call me Dutch. But you know that." Russell Yellowhorse was the second-oldest man in the partisan platoon and a confirmed bachelor.

"Yes, sir." Yellowhorse smiled again.

"Who's this?" Dutch approached the gate, his eyes locked on the dog.

The puppy had a black and white-speckled coat with stout, tan legs. His barrel chest and stumpy legs foreshadowed the athlete the puppy would become. His face sparkled with the mischievous intelligence of the breed.

"He doesn't have a name yet, sir. Old Lady Delilah over by the crick breeds purebreds and sells them on the internet. At least she used to sell them on the internet. Dogs don't stop having litters just because the internet drives into a ditch, right?" He held the dog's face and examined her muzzle.

The president opened the gate with a squawk of the hinges and let Yellowhorse into the postage-stamp yard of dried grass, snow patches and naked rose shrubs.

“Whydontcha taker her?” Yellowhorse held the puppy out to the president. Dutch didn’t know if he was supposed to hold the dog or if he was being offered to keep him.

Was this another gambit? Dutch’s suspicion flexed, then relaxed. They wouldn’t send Russell Yellowhorse to negotiate. He had the worst case of “bed hair” Dutch had ever seen.

The dog’s magnetism overwhelmed Dutch’s consternation. He folded the ten pound dog into his arms and cooed at the licking, twisting ball of fur.

“What’s your name, huh? What should people call you, little man? Who’s your favorite old man?” Thoughts of horse-trading vanished.

Sharon McAdams appeared on the stoop and the screen door clapped shut behind her.

“Who’s this?” Her face lit up at the sight of the puppy.

“He doesn’t have a name yet,” Dutch replied. “He’s a Blue Heeler, right? I had one of these as a boy. He got bit by a rattler and died a few months after I got him. *But YOU aren’t going to mess with rattlers, are you, little man?”* Dutch scratched his ears and ruffled his neck.

The dog squirmed out of Dutch’s grip, hit the ground and bounded up the steps to Sharon. The puppy stretched up against her leg, turned its head and woofed at the men.

“I see who’s team you’re on,” Dutch chuckled. “Maybe we should call you *Honcho*, because you’re on the bosses’ team.”

Yellowhorse laughed and turned to head back out the gate.

“Hold up a second,” Dutch said. “Are you giving us this dog?”

“You named it,” Yellowhorse said, as though that answered the question.

Sharon McAdams looked up and her eyes cast wisdom as old as the gray mountains. “Of course we’ll keep him, Russell. That was so thoughtful of

you. Thank you. You've all been so kind to us."

Dutch glanced from the puppy to Sharon, but he didn't attempt to cast a vote in the matter. He was, once again, a man swept away by forces beyond his control.

"I'll let you get on with your day." Yellowhorse stepped onto the gravel road.

"Nonsense." Sharon shot him a dazzling smile. "Join us for coffee. I was just pressing it."

"Pressing it? That sounds fancy." Russell's laugh rumbled. "I get my coffee from a foil packet."

Sharon waved him up the steps and Yellowhorse obeyed.

They went inside with the dog, and Sharon served coffee around the wobbly dining table while they chatted and fawned over the puppy. "What do you do for work, Russ?" Dutch asked.

"Catch bait. Mostly worms," Yellowhorse replied. "But not much call for that now. The anglers aren't coming no more. So, I threw in with the army."

He meant the partisans. "Do you fish much?" Dutch asked.

"Purt-near every day. 'Least I did before everything closed up. Now, I can't justify the gas unless we're catching fish for dinner. Then, we mostly use M80 firecrackers to catch em."

Rainbow trout was regular fare on the cafeteria menu. "Is the fishing good here?" Dutch asked.

Yellowhorse nodded in pride, "Probably the best in southern Idaho, and that's sayin' a lot. We've got the blue ribbon rainbow trout fishery to beat all hell. You wanna go fishing?"

Dutch hadn't been fishing in more than ten years. He used to love to troll the lakes in eastern California, but that was before politics took over his life. The closest he got to fishing was hitting golf balls into water hazards. *God*, he hated golf.

"For you, I bet they'd give us the gas," Russell continued. "You're a

celebrity. Mountain View Lake's good for ice fishing right now. We catch twenty inchers on-the-regular." Yellowhorse demonstrated the size of the fish with his hands.

"On second thought, maybe we should wait on the fishing until we get this fight with the Russians behind us." Dutch drew back. He thought about returning the dog to Russell. Where they were going, a puppy couldn't go.

Yellowhorse grunted. Dutch couldn't tell if he agreed or not.

"Is your squad still getting waxed by the OpFor?" Dutch asked.

"Yep," Yellowhorse nodded.

"Yeah, that seems to be going around," Dutch said. "How would the Indian warriors fight back in the old days? The old Shoshone and Paiutes? Nobody talks much about that."

"Cause we don't remember." Yellowhorse chewed on his lip. "We remember the dances, the stories and most of the songs, but we don't remember how to make war, except what you teach us."

"That's too bad," the president said, to be polite.

"Not really." Yellowhorse paused and sipped his coffee. "Fighting never caught nobody a fish."

DUCK VALLEY RESERVATION had not prepared Mika for the suffering she saw on the road to Wyoming, particularly on the long, straight stretches of interstate between Idaho towns. The rest stops for weary travelers had become festering refugee camps.

She'd seen suffering in the poor reservations—filthy children and sallow-faced mothers—but nothing like this.

Every town with a horse and two dogs barricaded their off-ramps to impede starving visitors. Southern Idaho was a blank slate for two hundred miles in every direction—flat alfalfa fields and rolling sage brush as far as the

eye could see. But even postage-stamp towns bristled with rifles to repel the refugee masses.

Where semi trucks had finally run out of fuel, they were picked apart for supplies, spreading vortices of trash and cardboard. Huddled families stole from one another, and hundreds died from dysentery. People were buried alongside the overflowing public toilets. The Snake River flowed along the interstate for half its distance, and refugees hauled water across the freeway like beasts of burden. But water didn't hold back starvation.

Mika yearned to put down her gun and help the suffering people, but for the life of her, she could think of nothing—no policy change nor clever government program that would save them. All the brilliance had been shaken out of the human race, like a rogue wind against the grapevine. She'd spent her life preparing to lead her people down the path of enlightenment and plenty, but that path had been stomped flat by an invisible giant. Instead, she drove past those who suffered with a rifle in her hand. The cold, whipping wind dried her tears before they could escape the corner of her eyes.

The platoon of a hundred partisans were accompanied by six Humvees with belt-fed machine guns jutting out the rooftops like black stingers. Their route would follow the misery-laden interstate along the southern edge of Idaho until the town of Pocatello, then criss-cross the peaks and valleys of the Rockies on backroads toward Wyoming.

As the convoy trundled past the highway rest stops, the children stared, listless and slack-faced. They gaped like Middle Eastern refugees. Stark reality buffeted Mika: aid would never come for these wretched children and their despairing mothers.

The partisans topped off their fuel at Fort Hall casino before climbing into the spider web of mountain blacktop east of Pocatello. Mika had only a moment to say an awkward hello to Bethany, which was fortunate since Bethany seemed eager to return to her dim basement and green-glowing

screens. They left Fort Hall and continued into the foothills of the mountains the same day.

Two-track highways meandered through the high valley towns, bisecting every village and leaving no chance of side-stepping confrontation with the locals.

In this region, the President of the United States was the best letter of introduction a traveling party could carry. Several times a day, they approached town roadblocks. Guns would wink in the sunlight, then a greeting party would extend from the convoy with a white flag at the fore. They'd make introductions, gauge intent, then President McAdams would march forward to join them. Without exception, they were allowed to pass.

Thank God this president is a Republican, Mika grumbled. Half these towns probably wouldn't let a *lefty* president through. She hadn't voted for McAdams. According to Bethany, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. The Black Autumn collapse had been written in the annals of history and no president could stop it.

Mika doubted that was true. She wanted to believe that better, more-compassionate leadership could've stemmed the anger of the American ghettos and the civil disorder that'd set the cities on fire. Some part of her still clung to her schooling and the belief that smarter policy led to better outcomes. Without it, she simply had no idea what to believe.

Either way, Dutch McAdam's presence scored them a dozen hot meals on the road across Idaho and western Wyoming, which was more than she'd ever personally benefitted from a president, Left or Right.

The mountain towns lay quiet under new blankets of snow, surrounded by fallow fields put to sleep by the still winter. The townspeople who shuffled onto Main Street to watch them pass stared with veiled suspicion instead of the dullness of starvation. The timing of the Black Autumn collapse had been fortuitous for many of these farmers—it caught them in the high country potato, alfalfa and wheat harvest. As soon as truck transportation froze, the

towns squirreled away the bounty of their fields in cold rooms, potato cellars and feed barns. If the collapse had come a month later, it would've gone much worse for them.

The convoy slowed through dozens of mountain passes; the snow plows had their work cut out for them. The snow wasn't deep yet, in the calendar gap between Christmas and New Year's day, but the wind drifted the snow into towering crests across the roads, like enormous sandbars across mountain valleys. The plows couldn't push through the deepest snow, so they borrowed a front end loader from a town and sent it ahead on a twenty-four hour work rotation to chew through the tallest drifts one-bucket-at-a-time.

After ten days on the road, the convoy finally reached their sister tribe on the Wind River reservation. There were long hugs and bursts of gossip. Mika had never met anyone from Wind River Rez, but they shared Shoshone heritage. The connection was immediate and warm—as though their arrival brought fresh hope. But war loomed, even more terrifying than the apocalypse. The happy meetings sagged with dread. The partisan militia might never return.

Wind River had been one of the tribes to take Sagehen's preparedness warning seriously. Two weeks before Black Autumn, they made bulk purchases of dried beans, hay and wheat from local farmers. The warning had come from Mika's NAC think tank, and the Wind River natives showered her with adulation. For a fleeting moment, she felt the return of the old dream. Her hands didn't feel so empty. The rifle didn't weigh so much. Maybe, she could still serve her people.

But times were still very hard on the rez, with manufactured goods disappearing and fuel scarce. But the Wind River tribe knew how good they had it. For once, Native American wisdom had trumped modern technology, or so they thought. Only Mika knew that it'd been bleeding-edge technology that'd spared them.

Mika ached to promise them hope. Her heart brightened toward the future

only to remember Sagehen's prediction of desolation. The happy children in the dusty streets of Wind Rivers would suffer and die like those along the highway rest stops. Or perhaps they'd be poisoned by atomic clouds of radioactive chaff, or conscripted into long wars against the white man.

Mika arrested her enthusiasm when she saw the women of the tribe re-engage old-timey tribal living. She ached to take them into the woods, to gather panic grass seed or harvest the Gambel acorns. She stopped herself from wandering among the sheep. The women of Wind Rivers hungered for her leadership, but Mika couldn't do it, maybe shouldn't do it. The future she'd seen through Sagehen's eyes was hopeless.

The partisans topped off fuel tanks and transferred men and supplies from Humvees to pickup trucks. They left Wind Rivers for the remaining four hundred mile leg to Cheyenne outfitted like a civilian caravan. As she looked back at the rez, fading in the distance, a sunbeam broke through the sullen clouds like an ancient god grinning.

The hope found barren ground in Mika's heart. Her dreams hunted for a flower to land upon, but the winter had killed the blossoms, the stalks and maybe the roots too.

EVERY TOWN OFFERED fresh torture to President Dutch McAdams. The same questions arose.

What happened? Why couldn't the government stop it? Who's to blame?

Even though most people didn't accuse him directly, the implication was clear: this happened on your watch.

Even the townspeople most thrilled to see him on Main Street, hungered to know, "Will America return?"

They looked to Dutch for answers he couldn't give; and they cornered him with the question he asked himself in the doldrums of the night. Was

American gone forever?

Dutch and Agent Brooks decided to say nothing to the townspeople about the Russian threat until they could confirm their presence and intent. When people asked about their mission, they told the truth, but didn't voice their suspicions; they were heading east to secure the nuclear missile silos.

Seeing Dutch in multicam fatigues instead of a pinstripe suit raised questions. He was a partisan fighter now. Dutch carried his elaborate sniper rifle on his back, and a handgun on his hip. There was no mistaking him for a politician.

"Shouldn't you be leading, sir?" a man asked in a town near Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Dutch replied, "I lead a squad of twelve. Major Brooks is in command."

The man seemed unsatisfied with the answer, but there was nothing more for Dutch to say. It felt right to humble himself. The great nation had slipped through his fingers like sand through a fork, but the work of war held fast. He could do this job and sacrifice himself on the altar of what was lost. He could struggle against America's enemies. That was better than the alternative: lying about hope and wallowing in his internal hell. The people he faced wanted more from him, but Dutch didn't have it to give.

The convoy left Wind River reservation after the first of January and dropped into the flatlands of Wyoming. The missile silos were located where nuclear retaliation would kill the fewest, but in some ways, the people of the plains were the best of America. They had been the growers of hay and the makers of food for the careless engine of civilization.

Dutch and the partisans first encountered rumors of Russian paratroopers in Rock River, Wyoming. Word travelled with refugees from Cheyenne.

Dutch and Major Brooks spread the map on the table of a barely-functioning diner. The mayor of Rock River and a couple gray-bearded locals hovered over the conversation from their bar stool perches. Mika Whiterock sat in a booth, near enough to hear. There were no secrets in a partisan

fighting unit, for better or worse.

In his mind, Dutch knew they should avoid conflict with the Russians at all costs. In his heart, he hungered to fight. He hoped to press up against the white-clad enemy and send angry bullets from his sniper rifle. He leaned toward the incoming rounds, inviting them to take pieces of him. War felt real—more honest than the varnished quibbling that the world wanted of him.

Brooks ran a course with his finger along the map. “The Laramie Mountains will force us back onto the I-80. Once we get through the big snow drifts, we can push north and get off the main arteries where they’ll concentrate their surveillance.”

“Are you concerned they’ll detect us before we get there?” Dutch asked. He wasn’t concerned. He was case-hardened by the thought.

Major Brooks scratched his stubble. “I’m afraid they may have detected us already. Normally, they would monitor the roads in and out of their area of operation with satellites.”

“You think they still have satellites?” Dutch asked. “The Russians couldn’t be that much better off than our government, could they?”

Brooks considered it. “If they’re here, they’re better off than us by a lot. Getting from Russia to the U.S. would be a massive logistical undertaking. Just because we’re screwed doesn’t mean they are.”

“If you don’t mind,” one of the locals interrupted, “we think they’re headquartered in a town called Albin. It’s south’a Horse Creek plateau.” He lurched off his bar stool, stepped over and tapped a blank spot on the map. “The Russkies are telling everyone who’ll listen they’re here to secure the nukes—like we did for Russia after the commies got dipped in shit and set on fire. Pardon my French, Mr. President.”

Dutch nodded. “How many Russians?”

The locals looked at one another and shook their heads. “Nobody’s come out of Albin in a while. We don’t know what flew in on them big planes. Could be half the Russian army.”

“We can turn back now,” Major Brooks said. “We know the Russians are here, and that’s the reason we came. We needed to confirm that they occupied the Minuteman silos. That should remove any doubt among the natives.”

Dutch considered turning back. If the Russians occupied Warren Air Force base, they must also be sitting on Minot in North Dakota and Malmstrom in Montana. It might be all the information necessary to get Joe Whiterock and the Native American Congress off their asses. On the other hand, this was all just hearsay.

If the natives weren’t convinced by the reports of the locals, the partisans would’ve come all this way for nothing. The Native American tribes might buy the whole “securing nukes” story the Russians were selling.

“I need to see them.” Dutch sat back from the map. “If we don’t lay eyes on the Russians and even talk to them, I’m afraid the tribes won’t take this seriously enough to fight. They might ask for more time or more concrete information. They might dither. It’s in their nature to wait.”

“Then we go in,” Brooks said. “We take the smallest bite we can. Let’s nip at their heels then run away. I don’t want to get committed against whatever rolled off those Russian planes.”

Dutch nodded.

“So, we’re ditherers to you,” Mika interrupted.

Dutch had forgotten she was in the diner, listening. She was seated in a booth. He’d been so intent on the map, he’d stepped in it.

She stood up. “You think our congress can’t be trusted to make wise choices on behalf of our people?”

“I didn’t say that,” Dutch backpedaled. “I misspoke. I apologize.”

She stepped toward the map. Brooks backed away. Her eyes burned, patient but resolved. Dutch didn’t attempt escape. It was another lash, added to the many.

“But that’s how you see us? As inept?” her voice heated up and gained an

orange edge. The old men of Rockville gaped as the drama unfolded.

Mika laid her hands on the map. “It’s not the Native American civilization that fell to pieces because of capitalism and overblown technology. Our reservations are still standing, Mr. President. Your fancy plane is spread across a mountainside and your military is scattered.”

“Fair points,” Dutch said.

“Don’t patronize me,” she bristled. “My people are more than just soldiers. We’re the key to the future. We keep the secrets that you forgot.” Dutch struggled to follow her. The words made sense on the surface, but the fire in her eyes belied a greater meaning. Not for the first time, he wondered what the natives weren’t telling him.

Mika continued, “Until you understand us, recovery is doomed. We’re not *ditherers.* We just know that your way is *bullshit*. The only reason we’re helping is because there’s a chance you might wise up before it’s too late.”

In a manner that Dutch couldn’t quite comprehend, she *might* hold the key; but like every human being, she was overtaken by her voracious sense of self. Her loyalty to her clan blinded her.

But he’d heard enough. He’d taken enough of her medicine. Dutch raised a hand and halted her rant. “If those missiles fly, it won’t matter who holds the keys to the future.” Dutch focused on her eyes. “We’ll choke on the fallout and drown in our own vomit. This isn’t the time to argue. This is the time for action. Those Russians aren’t here for a cultural exchange. They’re here to destroy us. Let’s discuss native moral superiority after they’re gone.”

Mika’s lively eyes went cold and black. He’d taken it too far—let too much of his dispiritedness show. He’d brought his fist down with all the old authority of the United States, and the girl—right or not—seemed to flip a switch in her head. Her eyes retreated into the same, clotted resolve that Dutch felt. She didn’t concede. She seemed to decide that he wasn’t worth her effort—maybe that nothing was worth her effort.

She dropped her hands to her waist and walked out of the diner, as though

she'd paid the check and left.

The men leveled knowing glances at Dutch. It was obvious, every one of them, at one time or another, had been where he stood. He'd just had his ass handed to him, and he didn't entirely know how.

TEDDY CAUGHT Mika by the arm as she flew past on the sidewalk.

"Whoa. Hold up. What's wrong?" He guided her around.

"Your father…he thinks he's still the most powerful man in the world. What's it going to take for him to see that your way was a bonfire under an avalanche?"

She'd just had an argument with his father, he gathered. He said the first thing that came to mind. "In fairness, you're talking about the greatest civilization that ever existed on the face of the planet, right?"

She twisted out of his hand. "What? Did you forget about the burned-out cities? Wake up!"

Mika whipped around and flew off in the direction of the convoy.

Teddy blinked back her rebuke and ran his hand around the back of his neck. The breeze picked up in a fresh gust, and whipped past him, channeled by the little row of shops and abandoned cafes of Rockville. His eyes followed her away, storming down the sidewalk like a warship heading into a storm.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, then bloomed across his face.

7

Holbrook farmhouse
2 miles south of Albin, Wyoming

atov! Warning Order," the young lieutenant shouted up to Vitaly and shook a

page in the wind. Vitaly raised his eyebrows, but the officer probably couldn't see it under his balaclava. "Get down here and pack your things. We're moving out."

"M

Vitaly grabbed his rifle and snuffed out the coals in the tiny brazier he'd placed inside his sniper hide. The hut on top of the farmhouse had become his home away from home. Now they were yanking him.

"What's this?" he snarled as he climbed down the ladder. "Somebody at command need us to massage their feet?" It was all in good fun. He and the young officer had become friends in the weeks they'd been in America. For a caviar eater, the lieutenant was all right in Vitaly's book, and the kid was one hell of a chess player. Still not better than Vitaly, but he gave a good match.

"They say there's opposition inbound." The young man grinned. "They're sending us forward five miles to the granary up the road. We're to leave the radio antennas and comms guys and move up." Young soldiers hungered for action. Old soldiers appreciated the break in the monotony, but they knew too well: not every fight went as planned.

"Opposition?" Vitaly climbed down and snatched the communique out of the younger man's hand.

It read:

Warning Order: Irregular force approaching north north-west. Approx. 100 strong. Light weapons. Negative armor. Dismounted. Anticipated contact 08:00 01,06,27; 41.363872, -104.080494.

"Well, I'll be a gray goat's father." Vitaly grinned, then he slapped the paper into the lieutenant's chest. "Looks like you might get a ribbon for your dress uniform after all. Is this satellite intel?"

"The big antennas on the mountain triangulated a spike in ham radio chatter, then our satellites located the transmitting force. They're paramilitary. We've got drones over them now. Get your shit together. We

pull out in thirty.”

The lieutenant fairly danced back to the house. Vitaly grunted. He worried about leaving his brazier in the sniper hide. Would it be there when he came back—if he came back? It’d taken him four days to make the damned thing out of salvaged metal from around the farm and it’d take the comms geckos five seconds to steal it.

Combat was nothing new to him, but a few dozen Spetsnaz brothers had been killed in Idaho running a top-secret recovery mission. Payback might be nice, even if there was no way it could be the same insurgent unit that shot up his comrades in Idaho. That was hundreds of miles away.

Either way, Vitaly didn’t have much to ponder. War was war and it’d either fall in his shadow or it wouldn’t. Some things couldn’t be changed. But a good brazier—that was something to be prized.

Vitaly sucked cold air through his teeth and headed inside the farmhouse to pack his duffle.

MIKA WHITEROCK, with Dutch McAdam’s squad, rotated to the back of the patrol column. They were on-foot, spread out, and spaced in intervals. Mika picked up her sector of fire: left side, sixty degrees forward. She’d trained for over a month and scanning her sector for threats had become second nature.

The partisans left all the trucks in a corrugated metal barn sixteen miles from the town of Albin. Then they dismounted and continued on foot across the snowy fields, as far from roads as they could get. Two of the Sho-Pai boys ran a mile ahead of the column to scout. They hadn’t seen any Russians —nor anyone else, for that matter. Soon, they’d stop, make cold camp, and send out small teams to conduct reconnaissance.

As she trudged along the channels carved in the snow by the column, she made her peace: the Russians were the enemy of the land. Given Bethany’s

predictions, she had even more certainty of their intentions than even the president.

They were like the *Wendigo.* Devourers. Profane consumers. The land would spring back, as human consumption ebbed. The plains would return to grass. The sky would clear. The rivers would run clean again. The animals might even return. First, the invaders must be removed.

The Russians were here to defile the land, perhaps for decades to come. The natives and the whites were in this fight together, and their futures could be joined, like the confluence of two rivers.

Teddy McAdams turned, smiled at her, and waved. She smiled back to be courteous, then returned her eyes to her sector of fire. The president was three behind Mika in the order of march and his son was two in front.

She didn't want war against the whites as Sagehen predicted. She didn't want war with anyone, but especially not this family.

Sharon McAdams and her daughter Abigail worked the community kitchen and did more than their share of the work. Dutch and Teddy carried guns, just like the Sho-Pai. The men over sixty in Duck Valley hadn't been asked to fight, but the president stepped forward anyway. He was a racist, and certainly a clueless Baby Boomer. But he wasn't quite the entitled white patriarch she'd imagined when he was elected. And, like Mika, his future had been knocked flat by the apocalypse. When it came time to protect the land, they walked the same snow path.

Mika wasn't the only woman who'd enlisted. There were six other women from the reservation. Most struggled at first with the physical requirements, but she wasn't among them. She'd been a daily jogger for years. A bit of a pear-shaped figure was unavoidable considering her mother's genes, but she'd be damned if she ever gave up her three-mile workout run.

She'd chosen to fight alongside the partisans rather than cook stew and weave baskets. She'd wanted to be closer to the big decisions that would

shape their future. Given her responsibility for Sagehen, she needed to see the Russians with her own eyes too.

The Sho-Pai scouts were waiting ahead, chewing stalks of dried hay, when the lead element arrived and called a halt. Mika stared at the concrete slab in the middle of nowhere, at the end of a trackless gravel road, covered in snow. A light pole hung over the slab, and a perimeter fence encircled it. They'd passed hundreds of weird-looking petroleum wells in the Wyoming wasteland, but she couldn't figure this one out.

"That's a Minuteman III silo," Teddy McAdams interrupted her thoughts. He passed her his water bottle. She took a sip and passed it back. "All that destructive power," Teddy slipped the bottle into a pouch on his battle belt. "You'd think they'd have warning signs or guard towers. Instead, it looks like a house that blew off its foundation." He leaned against the fence.

"I thought it was a gas well," she said.

"Nope. Just a monument of apocalypse." He chuckled. "Well, the *other* apocalypse. The big nuclear one that we always feared."

As if to punctuate the mention of apocalypse, they regarded the vast plain stretching from where they leaned against the fence to the Missouri river, five hundred miles away. The snow had blown from the choppy furrows of the tilled-under hayfields and collected into sculpted snowbanks against the irrigation canals. The canals bisected the fields like stubbled scars, where the few stunted trees dared to grow. The leftover frost collected in the dirt furrows like corduroy, punctuated by ragged, frozen clods of clay. The wind marched, unimpeded across the flatlands, tousling the partisans' hair and pushing into the seams of their coats.

Benny Parks reached over to Teddy. "Can I get a sip?"

Something splattered on Mika's shirt. Benny wobbled, then crumpled against the fence.

Boom! Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat! Thunk! Thunk!—Thunk! Thunk!

Gunfire thundered from the west. Mortars fired in a string like distant war

drums.

“Incoming!” Colonel Brooks screamed. “Get down! Get down! Move!”

The ground churned with machine gun fire. Teddy grabbed Mika by the jacket and launched her up over a swell in the snow. They crashed down on the other side.

“Come on. Crawl!” he yelled in her face. She glanced back in shock at the still pile of Benny Parks. “Now! Mika, we’re being attacked!” They crawled, climbed to their knees, wobbled up and broke into a sprint across the jagged furrows. Bullets whizzed and whined around them. Their comrades fled in every direction. An Idaho National Guardsman dropped to his knees, pitched face first in the snow, executed an impossible front flip and remained motionless.

Brooks continued to scream into the team radio. “Ambush! Run!”

The field erupted in a chain of explosions. Geysers of snow, gravel and soil fountained into the air. Bodies flew like rag dolls. Teddy’s shouts became warbles in Mika’s ears. Her head swam. She hadn’t even considered doing anything with her rifle except run with it in her hands. She supposed she should shoot back, but she had no idea which direction to aim.

SOMETHING HEAVY HIT Dutch like a pillowcase full of marbles. The back of his head drove to the snow the instant before a mortar round obliterated the man standing next to him. Some unspeakable body part hit him in the side of the head so hard he almost passed out.

“Get up! Run to the other side of the field!” Brooks shouted as he dragged a wounded man up and over a mound. “Move!”

Dutch struggled to his knees, found his rifle, then climbed to his feet. He stumbled up the rise and burst into a sprint when his feet found level ground.

Bullets sizzled through the air like a shower of meteors. Perhaps the only

reason Dutch hadn't been cut down by the machine guns was the mortars. They filled the air with so much dirt, smoke and flying debris that he momentarily lost track of direction. He needed to run east.

The heart of the ambush was utter chaos; passing through the churning gloom of destruction was his only choice. Dutch was flung to the ground as another volley of mortars turned the field into divots of hot slag. He curled into a ball with the sniper rifle over his head like a broom handle protecting him from a god.

The volley of mortars tapered and Dutch looked up. Dead and wounded littered the furrows. He scanned the camouflage-clad bodies for Teddy, but couldn't tell one mangled corpse from another.

"We gotta go!" Colonel Brooks shouted again, his voice blasted directly in Dutch's ear through the forgotten radio ear bud. "We need to go NOW! All units retreat to the northeast and regroup at secondary ORP. Repeat: all units retreat northeast and regroup at SECONDARY ORP. Primary ORP is compromised. Go!!"

How Brooks could keep track of the battle, in the midst of this hell on earth, was beyond Dutch. How he even remembered to key the radio bordered heroic.

"Move out. They're flanking us. Move out!" the earbud blasted.

Dutch stood to run, looked over his shoulder and saw a row of low, squat vehicles—armor of some sort—half a mile away, flying across a snow field to their south. The Russian vehicles were looping around to close off their retreat. Brooks had ordered them to run away from the armor, toward Nebraska, deeper into the missile fields. To escape from the trap was their first priority. Proper retreat would be secondary.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Another string of mortars whirred into the air. Dutch ran for his life.

A distant irrigation canal offered cover to the fleeing partisans from the raking machine gun fire. Dutch dashed pell-mell across the snow field, away

from the missile silo and into the alfalfa stubble.

Dutch couldn't remember where the secondary ORP was located, but it didn't matter. There was no cover here—just wide-open field. The Russians could charge straight across with their armor and mow them all down.

Dutch assumed the attackers were Russians. The ambush had been launched from the very edge of sight: mortars, machine guns, sniper rifles. His unit hadn't fired a single, effective shot. The enemy had known precisely where they would be and they'd attacked at their discretion.

How could indian kids, worn out National Guardsmen and a couple old men hope to face down mechanized paratroopers? It had been a preposterous delusion—a sword waiting to drop from the sky.

Dutch ran across the field with each foot fall lifting a quarter pound of wet snow. Bullets buzzed the air. Wet earth pattered from the sky. The field crossing continued, endlessly, ponderously, toward the far boundary that Dutch would never reach. He focused on the only scrap of cover he could see for miles—the irrigation canal, mostly just a line of knotty scrub at the far edge of the field. It might've been a ditch, or a mass grave.

Now they knew for sure. Dutch's mind churned as he stumbled through the uneven field. It'd been a stupid justification for entering enemy territory —something a man would do only *before* he knew the horror of ambush.

As Dutch settled into an uneven gallop, he glanced left and right. Partisans ran like terrified schoolchildren. Some had abandoned their guns.

If he was wiped from the earth, would it be justice? To live by the sword and die by the sword, as the Bible promised?

The thundering blood in his ears overwhelmed his ability to think. Running for his life was all he could do.

Distant machine guns chattered, *ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta...*

A burning, searing hammer slammed into his bicep and sent him spinning to the ground. Dutch's face plowed into the snow. He groaned, flipped on his back and clapped a hand on the burning rend through his arm.

Machine gun bullet. It passed through. Oh, sweet Jesus, it hurts.

Dutch struggled to get up, but his legs had turned to mush. The adrenaline-soaked run had turned every muscle to water. The bullet wound had overcome him with a rush of wet heat, head to toe. He could barely climb to his knees.

MIKA PEERED over the edge of the snow-filled canal. A dozen men fled toward her, away from the relentless, overlapping waves of machine gun fire.

Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta

Thunk, thunk, thunk, the mortars sounded.

Teddy McAdams dove into the ditch beside her. He thrust his rifle over the lip of the canal at an enemy they couldn't see.

"Where the fuck are they?" he swore. "Why don't they show themselves?"

A Sho-Pai man on the far side of the field went down, half an arm missing. A dozen runners charged across in blind, stricken terror.

"Where are they shooting from?" Teddy brayed, his fury lapping at the edges of sanity. "That's my dad. That's him!"

Dutch McAdams stumbled across the snow field. He was indistinguishable from the other runners except he was slower, and he carried his absurdly-large sniper rifle. Something swatted him in the arm and he spun like a top, then plowed into the snow face-first.

Teddy flew out of the canal like a ball out of a cannon. He sprinted toward his father. Machine gun bullets whizzed and growled across the field like metal hornets, raking men to the ground.

Teddy reached his dad, burrowed under his arm, then stood upright. They hobbled toward Mika like broken toys, akimbo and out-of-step.

The Sho-Pai man with half an arm who'd fallen was back up and running

again, he fell into step in the plowed snow behind the president and his son. Then, the native's hand flung skyward and blood jetted from a bundle of missing fingers. He fell again to his knees, holding up his bullet-ruined hand.

Teddy and Dutch reached the ditch, but only Dutch dropped in. Teddy spun and turned. For a moment, Mika flooded with horror that he'd been shot, but his back was straight and his eyes searching. He centered on the Sho-Pai man with half an arm and a ruined hand and rushed back into the field.

Ta-*ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta...*

Thousands of bullets streaked through the crisp air, caterwauling like alley cats. When they struck something solid, they continuing their warbling course—wraiths of death, spinning in all directions.

Teddy McAdams—late the foolish schoolboy—snatched the half-handed Sho-Pai fighter by the back of his coat, and dragged him in a stumbling run toward the ditch.

Pock! A bullet chipped off the skull of the Sho-Pai and sprayed his brains across the snow. The bullet continued across the snowy plain; wobbling its last. *Waudl-waudl-waudl-zzzzz*...He tipped sideways into the snowbank, just shy of cover.

"Argh!" Teddy screamed in fury as he dropped back into the ditch. He scrambled to his father and checked the bicep wound. It bled profusely down Dutch's arm and filled his palm with blood.

"Teddy," Mika warned. "No time for first aid. We need to get away from these bullets. We have to go now! Can he run?"

"I can run," the president answered.

A WOLF'S bite of meat had been taken from Dutch's left bicep, and it hurt like a torch, but Dutch was very much alive. The shock had abated and his will to

fight burned bright. He packed a scrap of his torn camo jacket into the wound and held it in place as he ran.

The mortars had gone quiet, as had the machine guns. The Russians might've been caught off-guard by the partisan's flight deeper into Nebraska. The churning tanks would angle toward them now, seeking targets of opportunity. But the partisans fled in every direction of the compass. They spread out, making them difficult rabbits to kill.

Mika breach checked her hunting rifle and whispered, "Should we work our way south down this ditch? Maybe we can follow dry canals until we cross over into Nebraska. Then, we loop back toward the secondary ORP. What do you think, sir?"

Dutch laughed, and coughed, rattling in his jitters. "Young lady, if you know where the secondary ORP is located, then you're twice the soldier I am."

She answered, wide-eyed and terrified. "I think I can find it. I'm good with directions."

"First things first," Teddy said. "We get the hell away from here. Our unit is spread all over these fields, and that's probably the only chance we have—to slip away in the confusion."

"What about our wounded? And our dead?" Mika asked.

She looked straight ahead, but the question belonged to Dutch.

"We leave them," he said. "We have to get back. We need to get in contact with your grandfather and tell him—tell them—about the Russians. Otherwise, this was all for nothing—our friends died for nothing."

JOE WHITEROCK STOOD outside his house in Duck Valley, and stared at the wispy, winter clouds against the blue sky, as though he might see a radio signal coming from the reconnaissance mission two states away. He hadn't

heard from his granddaughter since they left Wind River Rez. That'd been four days ago, but he shouldn't worry yet, he chided himself. They'd gone radio silent by choice because ham radio communication might be overheard. Their calls had grown spotty anyway—more dependent on the vagaries of weather and sun the farther the unit got from Duck Valley.

Joe had been busy. The Cherokee, Sioux, Blackfeet, Utes, Shoshone, Chippewa and Apache were all "in" to contribute soldiers to a common cause should they discover the Russians were occupying the missile silos. The Crow reservation in Montana had heard rumors of Russians at Malmstrom Air Force base. They were ready to fight. The Russians were a direct threat to their land.

But everything hinged on the Navajo. They were the largest tribe by far. They could field the entire fighting force alone if they chose. They were also the biggest bureaucracy, with a land mass almost the size of South Carolina, and over 300,000 people. The Navajo were leaning "yes," but even with a highly-placed cadre of friends in the Navajo government, Joe couldn't guarantee their support. They needed solid proof of ill-intent from the Russians before they fully committed.

The Sioux and Choctaw were voting "no"—Joe had political enemies in the Sioux, and the Choctaw had been on a peace-and-love kick for the last ten years. But if the Navajo threw in, both would probably come along.

All he required was proof of aggression from the Russians, and for the bullheaded president to agree to the Native American Congress' terms.

Dutch McAdams hadn't budged an inch on the issue. The issue of the Constitution and Bill of Rights was strangely *personal* to McAdams. The president hadn't even paused to consider the content of the amendments—which was a whole 'nother can of sardines, since Joe didn't much understand it either.

When he researched "artificial intelligence" three years back, before investing in Bethany Richards, he'd stumbled upon a humor website that

generated motivational posters formulated by AI. They were a mess of apt-sounding, yet patently absurd phrases.

“Don’t argue with success. Be naked.”
“Having a panic attack? Stop it.”
“Dancing changes the way you see parents.”

When Joe first read the AI-proposed amendments to the Constitution, it’d reminded him of those “motivational” posters. They were words in English, and they fit together grammatically, but some of them described a parallel universe—a United States where people could digitally veto any law, where there was no interstate commerce clause, where citizenship had to be earned through volunteerism. Any one of those changes could make a law school debate for decades. All of them together represented a reckless lunge—like turning the government over to a Magic 8-ball.

Bethany claimed the changes were among the billions of options Glinda had weighed against the predicted future—like a monkey hammering on a keyboard, eventually to complete the works of Shakespeare. With billions of possible options, these six resulted in a much shorter “dark age” for the North American continent—a speedier recovery from the recent nastiness.

But why?

Joe could follow the thread on a couple of the alterations, and see how they might turn out well. He could agree that service in the military, or service in humanitarian work, might yield better citizens—people likely to vote for the good of everyone instead of just themselves.

But why would taxing robots make any difference? Why would it shorten a dark age by four hundred years? Joe couldn’t recall ever having seen a robot, and they wouldn’t probably be building robots for a long, long time. Robotics engineers were focused on growing carrots right now, or fighting off marauders. Making self-driving vehicles was the last thing on anyone’s

mind. All that modern technology had been thrown to the wind.

Or had it?

Maybe technology was like a genie freed from its bottle. Maybe it'd take more than an apocalypse to cram it back inside. Somewhere, the tech for robots hung in the air, like a smell humanity wouldn't forget. Billions of survivors would know it was *possible*, and some thousands would know where to look for it. Technology could pop back up like a tomato seed in the springtime. Perhaps taxing robots made sense sooner than he imagined.

Joe thought about taking each change to the Constitution and mulling it over with President McAdams one-at-a-time. He'd break out his stash of Cuban cigars and his last bottles of fine Kentucky bourbon, and they'd meander through Glinda's new constitution like two college boys chatting up utopia. Among the curious words, the two old men might find common cause —a bright nation built on the AI's "motivational posters" and their own imaginations.

But without a *desire* to see the possibilities, Dutch McAdams wouldn't see anything but his own predisposition. He would have to *want* to go on that journey with Joe, or it'd be an exasperating, fruitless exercise; a Chinese fire drill around a burning donkey cart.

The President of the United States was in the grips of a ferocious desire to refuse. Joe could not confront that directly, lest he become the enemy of his friend. This whole shebang really was in the hands of the gods.

Joe prayed. "Almighty God, this one's on you. You call the play and I'll run it. I'm right here, with nothing better to do than take your lead. Oh, and if you don't mind, spare a thought for my granddaughter's safety."

The messenger boy from the ham radio station trotted up to Joe and handed him a quarter page of paper. He recognized Doug Windtrotter's handwriting.

The Navajo Nation wants to see President McAdams before they

commit forces.

Joe folded the slip and put it in his pocket. He'd honestly never thought he'd leave the reservation again. The end of the world had seemed like a good time to retire.

But he just promised to run God's play. With the timing of the note and all, God could be telling him that his granddaughter's life depended on it. Joe breathed in the air of the snowbound valley, turned and went inside to pack.

8

Near Jensen Granary
5 miles south of Albin, Wyoming

Vitaly picked through the enemy dead. As usual, they looked like children. His heart felt like a brick in his chest. He'd been at war too long.

As anticipated, they'd laid waste to the band of Americans. It would've been a stretch to call them a light company or a platoon. That would've implied military bearing.

Instead, they'd destroyed an armed, wandering tribe. Most of the dead appeared to be Latin American, or maybe American Indian. Vitaly couldn't tell the difference. America had so many racial sub-groups, he couldn't keep them straight. Mostly, though, they weren't "white."

They lined them up on the road embankment: thirty-four dead and three wounded. They'd treat and interrogate the wounded to see if there was anything more to their story. Vitaly didn't know what command would do with them then. Probably shoot them.

The ambush had gone down textbook, which wasn't surprising since they'd watched the insurgents patrol into their area for a couple hours before striking. They'd set up a far ambush, about a kilometer off the insurgent's path, and rained death on them with mortars, RPK machine guns and sniper fire. When the smoke got so dense they couldn't see the ambush, they paused. The survivors bolted in every direction.

Traipsing across hill and dale trying to find them would be too much work and might cause problems with the locals. Better to let the shattered remnants of the patrol go back to whatever hole they'd crawled out of. Probably Cheyenne, Vitaly guessed. The thermal imaging from the drones indicated that the American irregulars weren't regrouping—they'd blown apart like smoke.

Vitaly and his unit weren't in America to rack up kills. They'd hit the unit to force them to disperse and go home. The mission was to swap the American nuclear missiles to the bidding of Moscow—whatever that might be.

Vitaly heard a rumor that the hackers were mystified by the American missile control systems. They were so old that the launch codes appeared to be a combination of electronic and mechanical encryption—like the lovechild of an IBM computer and a World War Two German Enigma machine. The hackers despaired. There was talk of attempting an assault on the NORAD control center in Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado Springs, to find the other half

of the mechanical code.

To Vitaly, it sounded like a case of forgetting to bring the right cable—which would be a typical, Russian military fuck-up; to travel all this way and bring an ethernet cable instead of a USB.

The brass hadn't put any hackers to death for dereliction of duty, so it probably wasn't as simple as a forgotten cable, but Vitaly would shoot the hackers himself if they were forced to assault the impregnable NORAD base in Colorado.

Apocalypse or not, the defense at NORAD would chew up a Spetsnaz battalion like a dog wolfing down a cheese sandwich. The hardened, buried base would be full of military survivors and their families. They would have supplies to last them years and no reason to leave. If his unit was ordered to breach Cheyenne Mountain, there would only be a slim chance the defenders wouldn't destroy the codes first. The assault would be a desperate gambit, and would demand hell's ransom in Spetsnaz blood.

Vitaly preferred it right here, puttering around under the frozen, blue sky, repulsing the occasional band of nomads that wandered too close.

With three battalions of Spetsnaz—one at each nuclear missile base—and three cadres of hackers working the problem, it was only a matter of time, hopefully, before they figured it out. Vitaly learned long ago not to borrow trouble from the uncertain future. He would sit back and enjoy the mission in America without worrying about NORAD.

He looked down at the body of a dead girl. She had dark skin like an Arab or an Afghan, but the facial structure was different. He'd been told that American farm girls were beautiful, but he wasn't seeing it. Dead people were never attractive, in his experience. Their faces hung slack in creepy ways.

If they stayed much longer, he'd need to start looking for a local girl. He wondered how American girls felt about strapping, Russian commandos.

He shrugged. Anything might be possible in the apocalypse.

As night fell on the Wyoming plains a hard wind blew in from the north. Mika found herself freezing to death with the president and his son. Wyoming would kill them before morning if they didn't find shelter.

In the stretch of ranch land between Nebraska and the city of Cheyenne, there were very few homes. As dark descended there wasn't a single light except the hard, frozen wink of the stars. No candles in the window. No solar lamps to draw weary travelers. The trio of partisans wandered, freezing, searching for a structure—any kind of structure.

They eventually surrendered caution and climbed out of the criss-cross of irrigation ditches and onto a gravel road, now basted in ice. From the raised roadbed they might see the slight protrusion of a home or a barn against the blacked-out horizon.

Mika looped her Silva compass around her neck, and she paid close attention to the distances, adding up her best guesses at how far they'd walked at each ninety-degree turn: two miles east across the Nebraska state line, three miles south toward the interstate, then eight miles west into the hinterland. They should've been within a couple miles of the secondary ORP; a farmhouse with four grain silos and a barn.

With the great, dark chasms between structures, they could wander all night and not find the right one. They needed to bivouac overnight, get warm, then hunt for the ORP in the morning. It'd been over an hour since they'd seen any kind of structure, and their sweat-soaked clothing had frozen stiff. The snow wasn't deep enough to fill their boots, but the cuffs of their pants grew heavy with ice. If they remained outside for much longer, they'd begin to falter, particularly the president.

So far, he'd been a solid trooper. He'd kept up with she and Teddy, but his heavy breathing was audible in the silence of the frigid night. He wouldn't maintain the forced march all night—physically fit or not.

The Russians had probably given up pursuit. After the ambush, there had been a few bursts of machine gun fire, then a few solitary cracks of rifle fire. After that, silence.

She assumed the Russians could hunt them down if they so desired. Colonel Brooks had talked about the possibility of thermal imaging, satellite overwatch and drones. With the cold night, they would stand out out like beacons against the ground. But the quiet hadn't been broken since the ambush. The survivors of their unit must be either captured, under shelter or wandering toward their ORP.

"There." Teddy McAdams broke the silence.

"What do you see?" Dutch asked.

"A flicker of light. I think it's a building. Or several buildings. I can only see them in my peripheral vision."

"Where?" Mika asked as she gathered with them.

"West northwest," Teddy replied.

He must have his compass out, Mika realized. Teddy had been double-checking her navigation this whole time. *Not bad for a video gamer,* she thought to herself.

"What's your best guess at our location?" she asked. A second set of eyes was always valuable when navigating. Her mother had taught her how to read a map, follow the landmarks and return to the best foraging grounds. She'd cautioned Mika against relying only on herself alone. The clan together was always smarter than its smartest individual. "How close are we to the secondary ORP?"

"Hmm." Teddy took his time with the question. "Best guess: we're one-point-five miles south and almost dead-on-the-money east to west."

"Do you think that light's the ORP? I still don't see it." She tried his trick with her peripheral vision but saw nothing but the stars and the barely-lit snow fields. The moon had yet to show its gray face.

"I don't think so," he said while he fluffed his coat. It was a futile attempt

to dry out, given the temperatures. “I think we should check it, though. It might be other wanderers from the unit.”

“No reason not to pay them a visit.” Mika hitched up her load bearing equipment. “We have our celebrity guest with us to pass out handshakes if they’re locals.”

Dutch grunted a chuckle, but it was difficult for any of them to find the humor in the situation. They were slowly dying of hypothermia.

Teddy took point, and led them toward the destination only he could see. After a half hour of trudging cross-country, a dog barked in the distance. Teddy motioned for them to stop. Mika heard the pause in the crunching snow more than saw his hand signal.

“Identify yourself!” someone shouted from the gloom.

Mika moved up to Dutch and Teddy. They’d dropped prone in the snow.

“We’re travelers from the Wind River reservation,” Dutch replied. “We seek shelter.”

“Stay exactly where you are,” the night voice commanded. He had no Russian accent. “If you maneuver at all, we’ll shoot.”

Maneuver seemed a strange word for a farmer, Mika thought. The voice wasn’t anyone from the Duck Valley unit. The English was too precise, too clipped. East Coast, she figured.

“Bonanza,” Dutch called out the partisans’ challenge-and-reply code word. The watchers in the dark didn’t answer. Mika thought she heard footfalls surrounding them.

“They’re encircling us,” she whispered.

“We’re crashing their party,” Teddy said. “They brought the beer, they make the rules.”

A high-powered flashlight washed over them in the snow.

“Keep your hands away from your rifles.” There was no hint of a Russian accent from the second voice, either.

“I’m Dutch McAdams, President of the United States. I’m going to stand

up.”

Their captors mumbled but were probably too flummoxed to argue. Dutch got to his knees. The flashlight beam focused on his face.

“I’ll be dipped in shit,” one of the men in the dark proclaimed. “That really is President McAdams.”

“We’re good out here,” another man spoke, probably into his radio. “RTB plus three.”

“Our apologies, sir.” A man stepped into the light and helped the president to his feet. The man wore camouflage. Mika looked around at the edge of the light. All wore camouflage. Three more soldiers stepped forward and helped Mika and Teddy up.

“We’re this way, sir.” The leader guided the president toward a cluster of nearby buildings, still barely visible in the starlight. Mika and Teddy followed.

They slipped through a doorway and into a warm, dark space, heated by the orange flicker of a fireplace. Otherwise, it was perfectly black inside. The door clacked shut behind the last man.

“All accounted for and building is blacked out,” someone by the door said in the dark.

“Going lit.” One at a time, Coleman lanterns sparked then whooshed around the room. The yellow glow revealed a farmhouse kitchen and a small living room. There were eight men, all military age, plus one Sho-Pai. Russell Yellowhorse had found his way there before them.

“Welcome, sir.” A tall man in a camo cap saluted President McAdams, likely the officer in charge. “I’m Captain Forbes, Air Force security, at your command.”

“Thank you,” Dutch replied. “At ease.” He glanced around for a chair, noticed Yellowhorse, and clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Russ. You made it, thank God.”

“Yup.” Yellowhorse beamed. “Got out with my skin. Lost my rifle,

though. No holes anywhere, except the one's the Lord gave me."

Dutch shook his friend's hand, then sat down. "Everyone, please, sit. What are you boys doing out here?"

The captain spoke for the group, "We're the remainder of the west section of missile field security, Warren Air Force Base. We lost comms with HQ in Cheyenne and we don't know what happened to the other three security sections. There were a lot of men going AWOL when last we heard," the captain trailed off his explanation with a look of shame. "I don't know what happened to command. If I may ask, sir, what the heck are you doing out here? With all due respect, you look like you got in a bar fight."

"We were on a recon mission to assess the Russian incursion. We need to regroup with our unit and return to base in Nevada as soon as possible. We have urgent intel." Dutch began untying his boots. "You don't mind if I warm my feet by the fire, do you?"

"Not at all, sir." The airmen jumped up to help the president move his chair. "But what are YOU doing out here, if you don't mind me asking, sir?"

"Fighting," the president replied. "Mostly getting my butt kicked, to be honest. We lost a lot of our unit today. What do you know about the Russian force?"

The captain shook off his amazement. "Um. Well, they're Spetsnaz paratroopers. They have light armor, excellent SIGINT..."

"SIGINT?" Mika interrupted.

"Signals Intelligence. They know when we're broadcasting and they locate signals accurately, very quickly."

"That explains how they zeroed in and ate us for lunch," Teddy said. "Brooks was right. We should've stopped using our radios back at Wind River."

"We only use low power comms out here," the captain explained. "We're five miles from the Russian patrol radius, but line of sight on radio transmission goes a long way on the plains." The captain waved a hand at the

fields that surrounded the farm. “The Russians have no aircraft other than drones, and we think they are surveillance drones—no missiles, thankfully. But they do have man-portable anti-aircraft missiles. We’ve counted twelve BMD-3s and maybe ten GAZ Tigr all-terrain SUVs, most with heavy machine guns. They ferried the trucks in on prop planes. Landed them right on our highways. We estimate their troop strength at just over six hundred in this AO.”

“AO?” Mika asked.

“Area of Operation,” Teddy explained.

“Are you military?” the captain asked Teddy.

“No, sir. Call of Duty video gamer.” Teddy shrugged. “ROTC.”

The president gave his son an astonished glance. “ROTC? Since when?”

“I was planning on joining the Army after graduation,” he told his father.

Dutch sat back in his chair, his face a tableau of shock. “You didn’t talk to me about that.” He sounded more hurt than concerned.

“Because you’re the president, Dad.” The two didn’t seem to mind airing family business in front of strangers. It made sense to Mika—they’d seen friends killed that day. The time for decorum was past. “You have your duty and I have mine,” Teddy said.

Mika suddenly realized that all Teddy’s self-deprecating talk about his silly French degree and his video gaming had been bullshit—a carefully constructed storyline that obscured a serious man. Teddy did his duty as the president’s son, but he was much more than that.

“Because I’m president doesn’t mean we’re not friends,” Dutch grumbled. “If I thought we weren’t going to be friends anymore...” Dutch trailed off.

“Sir, once your feet are warm, I would like to show you something outside.” The captain covered the awkward silence.

Dutch set his boots on the hearth with the cuffs pointing toward the flames, drying the inside. “Does anyone have a dry pair of size eleven

boots?”

“...and a pair of dry socks?” the captain added as an airman headed down a dark hall.

THE CAPTAIN OPENED the barn and showed Dutch inside. When everyone was within, he closed the door and flicked on a flashlight. Enormous machines filled the empty space.

“They’re Boeing MH-139 Grey Wolfs. We’d just been issued these helos when the shit hit the fan. We’re the pilots and crew.” The captain flashed his light up and down the fuselages of the two helicopters. They’d been hidden inside a cavernous, corrugated barn.

“Armaments?” Teddy asked.

“240D machine guns. Two per.”

“Will they penetrate the Russian’s light tank armor?”

“From above, maybe. The BMD-3s are armored with ballistic steel on the front and maybe the sides. But we can definitely raise hell with the mortar crews and the dismounted soldiers. We can kill their SUVs too—until they shoot us down with anti-aircraft. However, I’m certain they don’t know we have these, so they won’t necessarily have MPADS on hand if we hit them without warning; we could do a lot of damage for those first few minutes before their surface-to-air missiles deploy.”

“But we can’t coordinate anything over radio,” Teddy added the bad news.

“Nope. They have at least one BMD outfitted with an electronic warfare rig, and lots of ground-based listening posts.”

“That’s not our concern tonight.” Dutch turned to the door. “We won’t be hitting the Russians without a much larger force. Captain; you’re to take all necessary precautions to keep this location and these birds a secret from the

Russians. Do not stick your head up for any reason, do you copy?"

"Yes sir. We practice light discipline and we're provisioned for the long haul," the captain assured him. "Unless they trip over us on a long-range patrol, we'll be standing by awaiting your orders."

"How're you on fuel?" Dutch asked.

"We topped off the farm fuel tanks with Jet A that we shuttled from the base before they bombed it all to hell."

"They hit the airbase?" Mika asked.

"They bombed it from high altitude—crippled the other helos and the transpo planes in Cheyenne."

Dutch nodded in the glow of the flashlight. "Tomorrow morning, we regroup with what's left of our partisan unit and head home."

"Where's home, sir?" one of the airmen asked.

"It's better you don't know, son," Dutch replied.

The group clicked off their lights and returned to the warmth of the farmhouse.

A DAY LATER, Teddy, Dutch and Mika rendezvoused with their partisan unit at the secondary ORP. Teddy and Mika had been right about its location. They found it within half an hour of setting out across the crystalline snow.

Teddy marveled at how quickly he shifted to the "new normal." Since he'd boarded Air Force One for the apocalypse, almost three months before, he'd been tortured, joined a native tribe, fought two gun battles and fallen in love. It was the falling in love that really, truly shook him. He'd never been in love before.

As a boy growing up, in the gap between the Millenials and Gen Z, he'd been content to spend his college days playing video games and bouncing around between the million-and-one Boston girls who were even less

interested in commitment than Teddy.

He'd never even known a Native American, much less dated one, but even in the midst of armageddon, he suddenly wanted to spend the rest of his life with this woman. Unfortunately, it was pretty obvious that Mika despised him.

Teddy watched her as she listened to the conversation between the president and Colonel Brooks. It was one of the things that knocked him for a loop about her: she always assumed she was relevant to the conversation. There was nothing "over her pay grade." She paid attention, and gave her opinion when she had one worth hearing. Her hard-as-granite confidence made him wobbly in the knees. *Where did she become so certain of herself?* She blazed into any topic with her doe eyes, rose-burnished cheeks and a set to her lips that almost hid her intellect. She was like a Disney princess who'd gone to law school.

Colonel Brooks seemed reluctant to give Teddy's dad direct orders. He couched his words in the language of a suggestion, almost as thought he was holding out for Dutch McAdams to resume the presidency even after he made it clear he wouldn't. "You should go with the fifty we've got, Mr. President. I'll wait here for the rest of the partisans. I estimate that we lost thirty in the ambush, so there should be twenty more on their way in. They'll be the slow ones—wounded most likely. Leave me the medic and get back to Duck Valley. Make the new intel count, sir. You're in charge of the detachment. I'll see you later in Nevada."

"I'd rather not be in command," Dutch argued.

"Sir, it's either you, Teddy or Mika; and I'd argue that there's no substitute for your life experience. They're smart kids and I'd be happy to have them as officers, but it's gotta be you, sir. My apologies."

"Okay. Should we go for the trucks, then?" Dutch asked Brooks.

They'd left the vehicles at their primary objective rally point, closer to the ambush site. Earlier, Brooks had thought it too dangerous to re-approach that

location. If the Russians knew to ambush them, they probably knew where they'd stashed their wheels.

Brooks nodded. "I sent scouts and they've returned. The trucks are good-to-go and fueled up like we left them. I'm pretty sure they're outside the Russian's surveillance perimeter, but just to be sure, you should drive the trucks out of the barn one-at-a-time over the course of an hour. Then group up at that truck stop outside Cheyenne. No need to attract attention from the Russian eyes in the sky. Leave four trucks at the ORP, and we'll come along, a few days behind you."

Dutch shook Brook's hand. "We'll go around to the north of Cheyenne and then follow our back-trail to Wind River, then to Duck Valley. I think it's probably safer to go through towns we know rather than going through towns we don't."

Brooks agreed. "I think we can resume radio comms an hour or two west of Cheyenne. We have no reason to think the Russians are monitoring all of Wyoming. But let's stick to the code book. No names. Certainly don't use the word "Dutch," okay?"

Teddy grabbed his pack off the ground and breach-checked his rifle. They were moving out. His dad and Brooks exchanged a few more words, then Brooks went to work getting the fifty fit men kitted up and moving.

"Back on the trail of tears, I guess," Teddy quipped to Mika.

She scowled at him and shook her head.

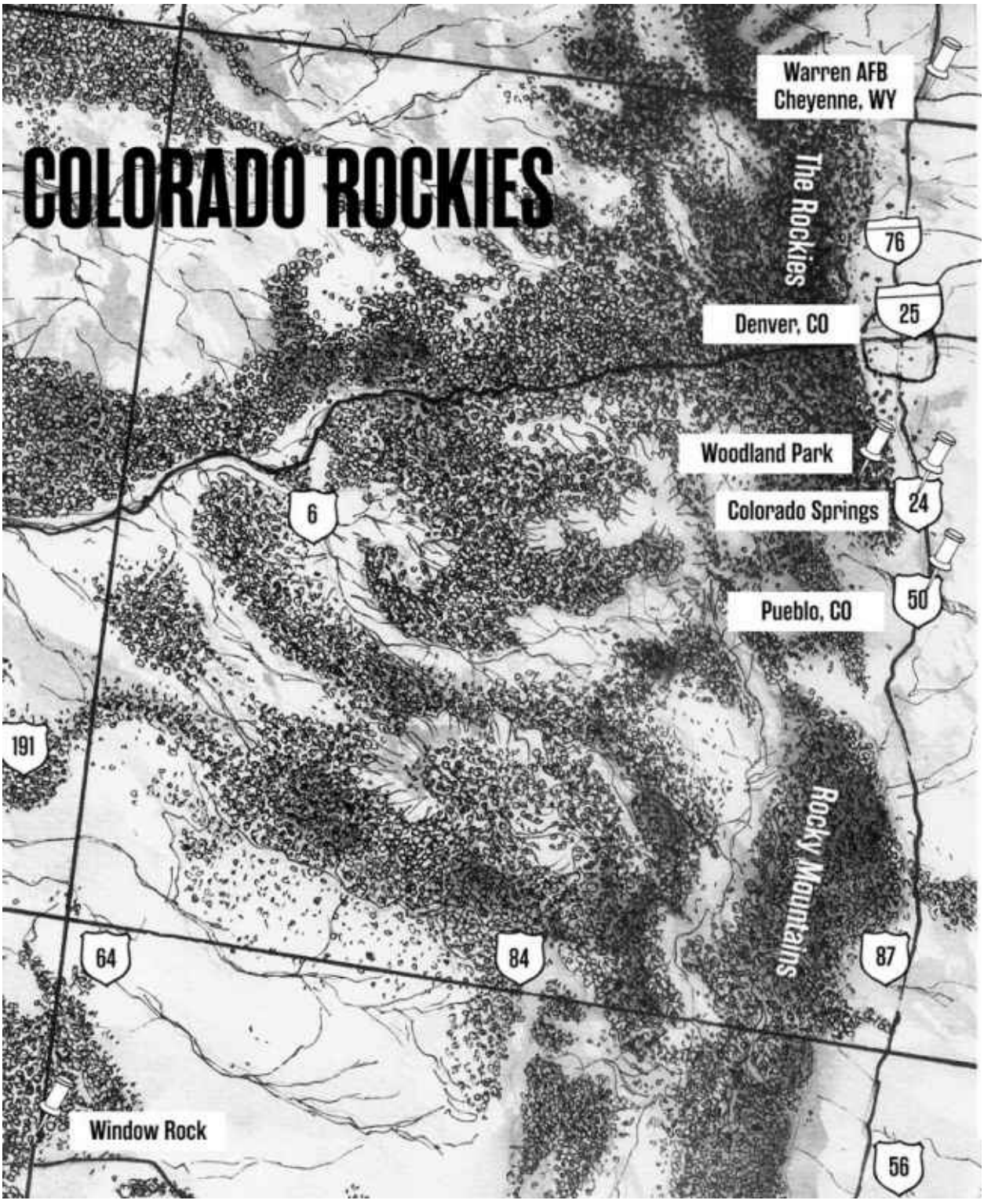
Why the hell had he said that? Teddy kicked himself. *What a galactically-stupid thing to say.*

"Yeah," she said. "We've been on foot a whole twenty hours. We're just like the women and children who marched five thousand miles and died in ditches."

Teddy went through, and discarded, five different ways of taking it back. But then the platoon moved out, and he lost his chance.

Mika assumed her place in the column, six places ahead of him. It'd be at

least an hour before he could apologize. God only knew what conclusions she'd reach about him in the meantime—just another East Coast frat boy with a big mouth.


COLORADO ROCKIES
Warren AFB
Cheyenne, WY
The Rockies
76
25
Denver, CO
Woodland Park
Colorado Springs
24
6
50
Pueblo, CO
191
Rocky Mountains
64
84
87
Window Rock
56

9

Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

Query: odds of Russian missile launch from U.S. Minuteman III bases.

Result: 88.64%

Bethany had never seen this before. The predictive through-lines suddenly changed and obliterated past predictions. It was as though Glinda the Good Witch had side-stepped into an alternate reality, which of course was impossible. There was only this one universe, according to her chosen brand of physics.

But no matter how Bethany altered the input conditions, Glinda foresaw only a five hundred year dark age, at minimum. In most scenarios, the bad times began with a rogue nuclear launch by the Russians from American soil and a counter-strike from the Chinese against North America. The climate impact erased the next growing season in 65% of the former United States and greatly reduced plant fecundity everywhere. Death rates exceeded 94%.

Then, the apocalypse turned into something more akin to extinction.

Failed crop outcomes for one year led to a 34.56% abandonment of technology per year. Four years of overcast skies resulted in an 81.67% loss of modern technology, which created a destructive spiral of starvation and self-perpetuating barbarism, culminating in 97.78% extinction of the human race on the North American continent within ten years.

Once the technologies required for computing were lost—chemistry, metallurgy, solid state electronics, connectivity—human civilization fell off a cliff of enlightenment. Bethany attempted a few hundred predictive models that sussed out the odds that technology would flow back to North America from totalitarian regimes like the Chinese—those who survived the collapse more-or-less intact—but Glinda didn't have enough data to foresee it. China and Russia had operated in the dark since mid-October.

Clouds over the earth killed plants which then killed technology. Technology wasn't engraved in stone. It floated on magnetic hard drives in cloud servers. Magnets decayed, gradually losing their magnetic orientation. Unless a hard drive was refreshed and rewritten onto a new hard drive, the data thinned, then disappeared. Given enough time, technological information would lose its polarity and vanish. No form of data was eternal. Most didn't last five years.

No matter what factors she threw at the predictive models, it now seemed certain: the worst was yet to come. These first months after the collapse, survivors persisted from the fat of past generations. After the scraps of civilizations went rancid in a nuclear winter, true suffering would reign.

Bethany would've liked to leave it alone—to watch the data trickle toward inviolate fate. She had no responsibility for outcomes, and she liked it that way. She'd never actually looked at what she might do to nudge the course of history and ruin all of Glinda's glistening work. The possibility that she might do *anything* proactive caused her to cease chewing for almost thirty seconds.

Individual people couldn't change history. Human emotion was the

enemy. Desire was a plague.

But what if that individual person was her?

Her fingers flew across the keyboard and she hunted for a future in the data. One that scarcely existed.

A MESSAGE WAITED for Dutch at the Wind River Indian Reservation. It was a radio message from Joe Whiterock.

> *"Your presence is required as guest of the Navajo tribe at Window Rock, New Mexico. Sorry, Dutch. It's the only way. — Joe"*

Dutch wished Joe had used more words. He was tempted to try and reach him over the radio. He knew from past experience it might be a several day process to achieve connection. The ham repeaters between central Wyoming and northern Nevada were dead—they'd been pillaged for batteries and solar panels. Now, they relied on the vagaries of atmosphere and simplex radio to bounce signals off the underside of space. Requesting an explanation from Joe would be a colossal pain in the ass. Dutch didn't know when the Navajo expected him, and based on the ass kicking they'd just received, they'd need their army.

The skeletal radio message seemed like another Native American worthiness test. *Go pay homage to the Navajo.* The Indians had the President of the United States on the ropes, and they weren't going to be gracious about it. Dutch felt like he'd already given his pound of flesh, right out of the meaty part where his shoulder met the bicep. He rubbed the bandage where the airman had cleaned and sutured the gunshot wound. It itched like a sonofabitch, which hopefully meant it was healing.

What would Sharon say about Whiterock's message if she were there?

Dutch wished she were with him to calm his anger and smooth his angst. He rarely made a move without her input. Having a psychologist for a wife was his secret weapon as a statesman. She could cast political maneuvering in the crystal-clear terms of motive and pathology—seductive words that revealed the inevitable ego.

Sharon would probably ask, "What's the *meta*-message of Joe Whiterock's note?"

She'd want Dutch to look at the message *under* the message. Dutch was summoned to the Navajo, and he was given scant reason for it. He was being humbled. The natives wanted the United States to bow to their position of strength. That seemed obvious to Dutch.

Sharon would say "dig deeper."

Maybe they don't believe you can have a meeting of the minds until you drink from their well. Maybe they won't trust you with their sons and daughters until they know your heart.

Dutch heard her purring voice in his head, like an angel reading his notes. Sharon had an infuriating habit of contradicting his knee-jerk response, even when he was imagining her, but her delivery was pure Tupelo honey.

If it was an attempt by the natives to dominate the United States, Dutch would slam on the brakes and grind this train to a stop. *Screw the natives.* Their land was going to be poisoned by nuclear obliteration too. If they wanted to play games, they could choke on the fallout.

But if the summons was an olive branch—like a child offering an apple slice from his plate—then Dutch should accommodate them. Joe Whiterock had said, "sorry." Did he mean "sorry—take it or leave it" or "sorry—I need your help."

Their culture values humility, Sharon whispered.

Dutch had seen it before. African tribes were like this—particularly ancient ones. Dutch had sat in the red dirt of a chief's cattle corral, eating the liver of a kudu, fire-blackened and crunchy with specks of red dirt. The

leaders of the tribe had returned as simple men to the corral. They ate with their fingers. No matter their education and position, they hadn't forgotten they were herdsmen. Perhaps showing up on the doorstep of the Navajo would be enough to convince them Dutch could be trusted—and that the threat was real.

God knew, traveling across Colorado to New Mexico would be risky. That should be obeisance enough for anyone. Dutch scrawled a terse reply on the back of the message, and walked it to the mobile home with the radio antenna.

"I'm going. Hope it's worth it."

TEDDY HAD LOST FRIENDS. One moment he'd been marching, joking and sharing snacks with them, and the next moment they were gone. This wasn't a world of second chances, and for the first time in his life, he knew exactly what he wanted.

"I'm going with my dad south to Window Rock." Teddy wrung his hands as he told Mika the change of plans. "We were hoping—er, I was hoping—you'd come with us. We're taking the platoon. Those of us who made it," he explained.

Colonel Brooks still hadn't shown up with the remainder of the partisan unit. They would be leaving without them, at half strength. Teddy worried that Mika might disagree—that she might want to head straight back to Duck Valley to lick their wounds. But the steel in her eyes was anything but wounded.

She nodded agreement. "Of course. This is my squad and he's my commanding officer," she said. "You'll need me to make sense of the Navajo. I don't entirely understand the *Diné*, but I understand them better

than you two. They're going to want more than a chat."

"Yeah?" Concern washed over him again.

"The Navajo don't do anything without days of ceremony. They like to hedge their bets; spiritually, if you know what I mean. It's probably why they wanted your dad to come to them. They're going to make him sweat. Literally sweat."

Teddy had no idea what she meant, but he nodded.

"The trip's going to suck." He pulled a road map out of his shirt. "We have to cut east of the Rockies, avoid Denver and Colorado Springs, then cross the northern axis of New Mexico, east to west."

"We could head back to Utah and go south down the interstate." She ran her lovely finger down the map like a caress.

Teddy collected himself. "I'm afraid Salt Lake City might be trouble. The ham radioman heard rumor that the Mormons are spinning up some kind of civil war. I think we should go with the devil we don't know, and that's Colorado." He tapped Denver on the map.

"What's your dad say about that?" she asked.

"He agreed that it's a toss-up. He's asked me to lead the convoy. His shoulder's bothering him."

"I bet it is." Mika sounded concerned. "Did we round up some antibiotics for him?"

"No," Teddy said. "We left them in the med kit with the wounded. My dad insisted I not take from the Wind River supplies for his sake."

"That's dumb," Mika chastised. "I'll handle it." She turned and marched toward the med clinic without a goodbye.

Teddy folded the map and slipped it in his shirt. She clearly didn't fancy him. She probably saw him as a strap-hangar to his father.

He'd never had a serious girlfriend. The reason was simple: he'd never met a woman who could hold her own around his mother. Sharon McAdams cast a shadow that sent other women curling into fetal balls of insecurity. The

two girls Teddy brought home to meet his parents stopped returning his calls. They'd gone with him, anxious about meeting the president, and they left terrified of the First Lady. Sharon McAdams didn't even have to say anything—her personal gravity shook lesser women to the core. She was a titan of intellect and restraint, and profoundly intimidating to the kind of girls Teddy dated.

But Mika Whiterock seemed unfazed by her. Teddy had seen the two sharing a cup of tea at the cafeteria. Over their steaming mugs, they laughed about some private, shared tidbit. The sight of them sent a shiver down his spine; the raven-haired Native American and his blond, statuesque mother, side-by-side, tittering like schoolgirls. That had probably been the moment-of-no-return for Teddy. That's when he'd realized he'd never find another woman like Mika.

They were teammates on a fighting squad. They had each others' backs. Beyond that, Teddy wasn't fit to carry her water bottle. The day he boarded Air Force One after the collapse, he was a rudderless playboy—a Gen Z drifter on the tides of his father's good name.

She was a Native American. He was a "white colonialist." He couldn't see the world through her eyes, but he yearned to. For the first time, he burned to know about her twisted-up frustrations and her bluebell dreams. Before Mika, he would've said that he despised "victim culture," and he would've blithely lumped Native Americans in with the rest of the Woke Army. Now he wondered: what had he been missing? She didn't *feel* like a victim. She didn't *fight* like a victim.

Women had always dazzled him with their mystique. But Mika was an absolute puzzle of intrigue—in a class of her own. He wanted her in more ways than he'd ever known possible. Yet he was unworthy of her. She treated him cordially, but with no more deference than she treated the Sho-Pai boys in the unit.

He'd been standing in the same spot, like an idiot, staring at the med

clinic for several minutes. He shuffled his feet, then turned back to the convoy. He needed to tell his dad they'd be heading to Denver.

MIKA SWEET-TALKED THE "AUNTIE" at the med clinic into giving her a small bottle of Augmentin and a tube of Neosporin. Then she tracked down the president and asked to see his wound.

"It's fine," President McAdams argued as he pulled his shirt over his head. "It just itches, is all."

The president had been chatting with Russell Yellowhorse again. Mika saw the two together a lot, and it made her wonder; what did the President of the United States and a wild-haired bait salesman have to talk about?

"Gimme yer cup," Yellowhorse grunted at McAdams. "I'll getcha a refill." He took the president's coffee mug and headed toward the smell of fresh coffee.

"It's infected," she pronounced over the wound. The seepage was the wrong tint of yellow and the smell had turned from healing to slightly putrid. "I need to scrub this out."

The president sighed, but he was smart enough not to fight her. Nobody blew off infection now that antibiotics were scarce.

"I'll clean it at the clinic." Mika gathered the president's shirt and showed him the way.

As they walked the dusty street, he asked, "You said something the other day that got me thinking. You said: 'we hope you'll grow wise before it's too late.' What did you mean by that?"

"I shouldn't bark at you. It's not my place." She didn't mean it, but she said it to give the Republican another chance. It was hard not to give a bare-chested senior citizen the benefit of the doubt. He looked so vulnerable half-naked in the cold.

“I think it’s exactly your place. Aren’t you an employee of the Native American Congress?” he asked. “What did you mean when you said that?”

Mika held the glass door to the clinic open for President McAdams and called out to the front desk lady. “Hi Auntie. I’m back. I’m going to wash his wound in the sink, okay?” The nurse waved her through and Mika showed the president inside.

His question hung in the air. Mika pondered how to answer while she gathered soap and a soft brush. She and her grandfather had agreed that they wouldn’t discuss Sagehen with anyone, least of all McAdams. Not only was Bethany a state secret of the Native American Nation, but she was as unpredictable as a cross-eyed badger. Mika and her grandfather couldn’t trust McAdams with direct knowledge of the AI. Even if they did, McAdams wouldn’t believe it. Bethany Richards could barely bring herself to host a conversation, much less sell her talents on the world stage.

“What is it that you wanted to know?” she began scrubbing the wound over the sink. Living on a reservation in the middle of nowhere meant everyone had experience in first aid.

The president’s face twisted like a wrung dishrag. The scrubbing hurt. “I...meant...what did you mean...when you said ‘we hope you’ll grow wise before it’s too late?...Too late for what?”

She merrily scrubbed away the foul scab while he squirmed. “Too late, you know, to stop the Russians from firing your missiles at someone.”

He went silent while she debrided the wound. She finished, dabbed it dry and applied a layer of Neosporin. She laid clean bandages over the gash and taped them into place. Sweat stood out on his forehead, but his breathing returned to normal.

“Mika. Tell me the truth. We didn’t even know for sure that the Russians would be in Wyoming. Level with me. Too late for what?”

She shrugged, and punted with a half-truth. “We have our spiritual beliefs about the end of the world. The Sho-Pai, I mean. The way I look at it, we

either come together—the whites and the natives—or we suffer much more than we have so far."

The president raised his eyebrows. "To come together—by that are you saying I need to agree to help amend the Constitution?"

She shook her head. "It's much more than that—harder than that, actually. You don't know us at all. You know nothing of our way of life. But we know your world. We studied at your schools. We watched your TV. We even spent your dollars. But your culture is not our culture. You really have no idea, sir. We know you because we've lived in your American dream for generations. I'm not complaining; it was a good dream. But it's gone. It's in the past and you're still looking back. All you want is to get back what was lost. Indigenous Americans; we don't want that. Maybe what's in front of us," Mika waved toward the street, "is a third way. Maybe there's a new dream."

He snorted. "So to find this native way, we need to tax robots?"

"You people are so literal," she obfuscated. Her words sounded racist even to her, but she couldn't let him drag her back to specifics; back to Bethany and the AI. "This is where you start, by letting go of your Socratic reasoning and your fact-by-fact debate. Instead, drink from our cup. Run with our children. Fish with our old men. Then maybe we can discuss friendship in a way that isn't gibberish."

"Isn't that what I'm doing? Going to the Navajo to pay homage?" The president pulled on his thermal shirt with a grimace then he struggled back into his camo jacket.

"The Navajo way is the Navajo way. We're Paiute and Shoshone. Could I give you a bit of advice, Mr. President?" she asked. Russell Yellowhorse approached with two paper cups of coffee. He'd probably been searching the town for them, coffee-in-hand.

The president looked at Russell and the coffees, and nodded, his face open and sincere. "Certainly. I'd love some advice."

“Forget about checking the boxes with the Navajo. Just walk with them. I have no idea what they’re thinking, but trust the path. Natives don’t have a high opinion of peoples’ ability to bend the map—to control outcomes. We tend to roll with things.”

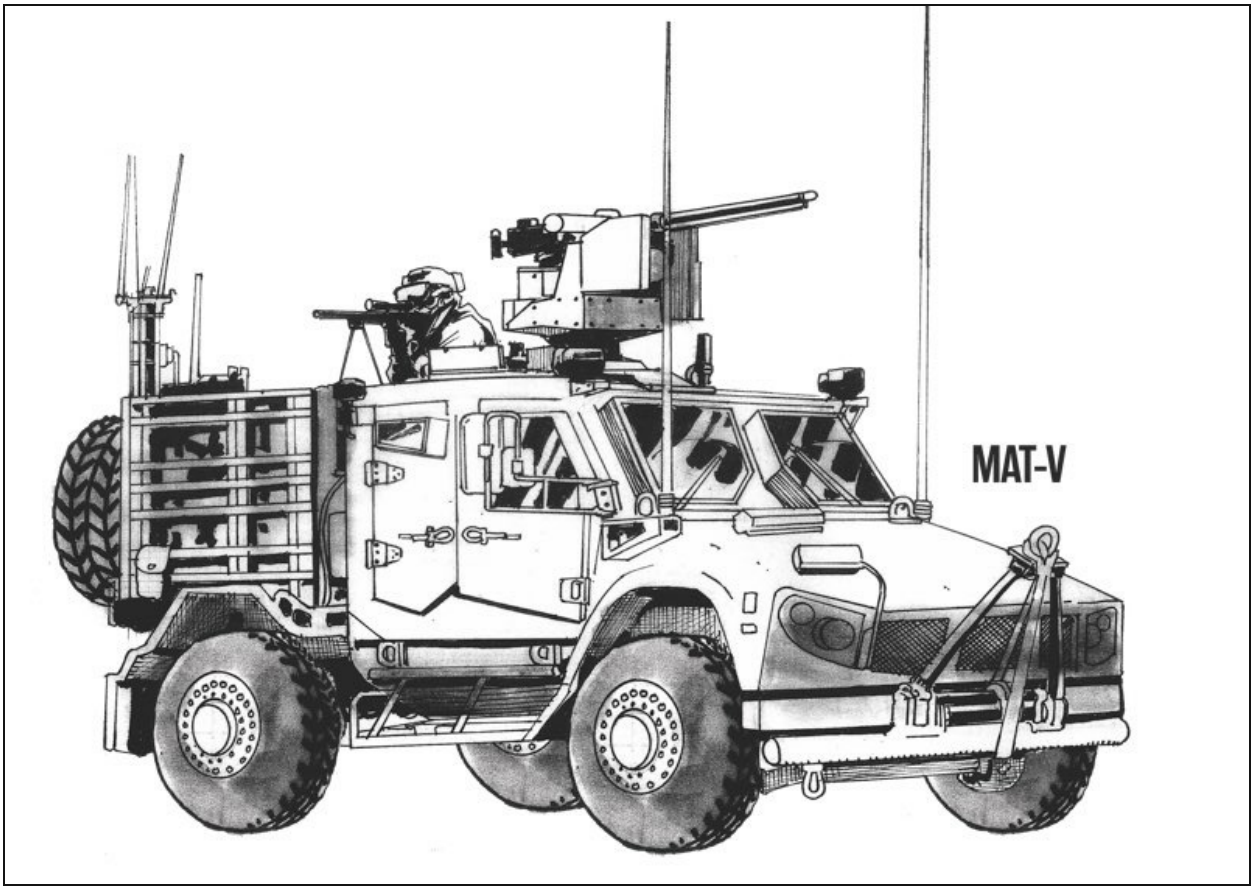
The president laughed. “Oh Mika, *the natives* might not try to force outcomes,” he motioned toward the dusty streets of Wind River, “but you do just fine.”

“I learned from the best,” she conceded the point. “Now maybe I can help you across that wide river between us.”

“I would like that.” His blue eyes drilled straight into hers. “But you might have to trust me with the truth.”

The canny old politician sensed she was holding back. She smiled and shrugged it off, as if to say “maybe.” But it was a lie. Telling Dutch McAdams about Sagehen was the last thing she’d do.

10



Holbrook farmhouse
2 miles south of Albin, Wyoming

Vitaly was beating the lieutenant at chess again. The young man was smarter than Vitaly, but smarts and experience were two separate mule paths. Lots of brains and little experience still landed the mule train in the middle of the river during the spring floods. Vitaly could tell from the look on the young man's face, he didn't know the trouble he was in.

Vitaly had been on both sides of this trap, many times, in thousands of games. He might not be the straightest screwdriver in the toolbox, but he was a case-hardened and oak-handled one.

"They say we might be heading south to NORAD," the lieutenant made conversation as Vitaly considered his next move. He still couldn't see any holes in the trap he'd laid six moves ago. The kid was folding nicely into the gap he'd set. It cost Vitaly his knight, but gained him the rook and two pawns. The lieutenant must've thought he could distract him by throwing out battalion scuttlebutt.

"NORAD? Why? Can't the eggheads crack the code?" Vitaly looked up to see the young officer's expression. As expected, he startled. It had been a good guess.

"I didn't tell you that. Don't go saying that I told you anything about the hackers," the lieutenant stammered.

Vitaly smiled. He was setting many good traps today. He'd just tricked the lieutenant into admitting that Russian hackers had failed to break the American nuclear missile computers. Vitaly considered tricking the officer into telling him what they planned on doing with the missiles, but a lieutenant wouldn't have that information.

"NORAD, huh? If the American military still exists, the other end of the missile launch computer is under their protection, under a mountain. Are our brilliant military strategists sure they want to dig into that anthill?" Vitaly moved a pawn into striking range of his bishop. It was the fake trap that hid the real trap. Half the time, winning at chess came down to correctly anticipating how easily the opponent could be distracted. It probably wasn't

true at the highest levels of competition, but in the barracks, he could usually win by flustering the other guy.

Vitaly harbored no illusions that his opinion mattered, but if asked, he'd prefer to stay at the farmhouse. He'd put a new roof on his sniper hide, and cobbled together a little chimney for the brazier. He'd achieved a degree of comfort, and if he'd learned one thing in his twelve years of military service, it was that one never walked away from comfort.

"It's just talk," the lieutenant tried to gloss over the secrets he'd already blabbed. He could be court-marshaled for sharing strategic talk with an enlisted man. It didn't matter that Vitaly had twice his time-in-service.

"If we go, who safeguards this area of operation? The hackers?" Vitaly asked while the lieutenant decided if he should hit the pawn. Vitaly already knew he wouldn't, but it was fun to needle the young man by saying top secret things an enlisted man shouldn't know.

"Erm. Um. I don't know what you mean by hackers." The lieutenant took his hand off his bishop and looked for other moves.

"Of course not." Vitaly laughed. "I'm sure we're going to NORAD to access their supply of Meals Ready to Eat. I hear the spaghetti is wonderful."

"Can we talk about something else," the lieutenant's eyebrows curled. Vitaly was making mean sport of the man, but officer or not, he liked the boy.

"Certainly, sir," Vitaly relented. "Let's talk about when we're getting more vodka. I'm almost out."

TEDDY MCADAMS WENT LOOKING for Mika Whiterock. He felt like he needed a second set of eyes on the map, and other than his dad, she was the best person to ask. The others in the group—mostly Sho-Pai young men—would agree with whatever Teddy thought. Mika, on the other hand, would usually

disagree, and that could be valuable when making decisions that could put the convoy at risk.

“Hey Mika,” he called out to her. She was taking a cup of tea from the back seat of one of the Humvees. They’d stopped for a piss break along a county road, and someone had fired up a propane stove and heated water for coffee and tea.

“Hey yourself, Teddy. Want some tea?” She offered him the cup she’d prepared for herself.

“No thanks, I’m good.” Teddy would’ve loved the tea, but he didn’t want to take hers. “Can I get your opinion on the route? I’m thinking we should loop back to the I-25 corridor. We’re almost past Colorado Springs, and we’ll have to go around to the east of these hills unless we head back west. Is it an unnecessary risk to cut through the town?”

He flipped the map around for her to see. She sipped tea and studied the roadmap. Her gloved fingers were surprisingly delicate for a soldier girl. He loved how she held the tea mug, all ten fingers wrapped around it for warmth.

January in Colorado was no joke. Even in the middle of the day it was below freezing. The sky clamped over the convoy—slate gray and monochromatic. They’d been on the road five days since Wind River. It’d taken that long to clear the snow drifts between Laramie and Denver without a front end loader. They’d given Denver a wide berth, but even in the cold-locked stillness, they could smell the rot coming from the city. Three million people were dying or had died in the cold mountain tomb.

Teddy had witnessed a lot of death-by-freezing in the two day loop around Denver, but the family that stood out in his mind had been curled together in the back seat of a Porsche Cayenne—a mother, father and two children, wrapped in the loose fabric of a family tent. Tiny icicles hung off the baby boy’s eyelashes. Teddy didn’t think he’d ever forget it; the eyelashes drooping with the weight, like wispy, beaded curtains across the boy’s froze-open eyeballs.

“I see what you mean,” Mika interrupted Teddy’s stupor. “It’s a long way around if we stick to the prairie. See here?” She pointed at a banana-shaped cluster of roads. “That’s an army base. Fort Carson. I wonder if there’s anything there we can use; maybe armored vehicles or even leftover American soldiers. Do you think they could still be at the base after this long?”

It was the eleventh of January, and Black Autumn had befallen the world the first of October—almost three-and-a-half months before.

“I doubt it.” Teddy sighed. “That’s a long time without orders. It’s probably worth a gander, though. If we found even one Stryker or Bradley Fighting Vehicle, it’d be worth the side trip.”

“And isn’t that NORAD?” She pointed at a mountain on the map.

“Yep. Looks like it,” Teddy said. “Who knew? Cheyenne Mountain isn’t in Cheyenne. It’s way down in Colorado Springs.” He looked up at her with a smile, but she stared at the map.

“Were you thinking that we’d follow Squirrel Creek Road into the town of Fountain?”

“Um, yeah. Is that too close to Colorado Springs?” Teddy asked.

“If we go any farther south, we’ll never know what happened at Fort Carson. I say let’s try the interstate.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Teddy folded the map and returned it to his shirt. He stood quietly while she sipped her tea.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“No. That’s it. Thanks.” Teddy waited while she turned and drifted back to her vehicle.

“ARE WE GOING BACK TO I-25?” Dutch asked Teddy.

Dutch had been napping, and preparing himself for the Navajo. He was

steeling himself for the posturing of old men, and he wasn't sure he had it in him to withstand it. He'd been blown up, shot and nearly frozen to death. At this point, he couldn't give a fuck less about the mind games old men play. What the world expected from him and what he could tolerate had hit a fork in the road.

Dutch's driving shift was dawn to noon, so he'd caught a couple hours of sleep after Teddy took over the wheel. He was avoiding taking pain meds for his arm, but it made him irritable.

One of the Sho-Pai boys rode shotgun, but they were terrible conversationalists. Unless the driver asked them direct questions, the boys sat quietly. Apparently, Native American culture hadn't taught them that "riding shotgun" meant keeping the driver awake with witty repartee.

While Teddy drove, he caught his dad up with what he'd missed. "We're just south of Colorado Springs, and we think it's safe to hop back on the interstate. Also, we'd like to check on Fort Carson."

"I don't remember where that base shook out after Sam Greaney's order to block in the cities," Dutch said. "Carson's the 4th Infantry Division, if memory serves; tanks, artillery, light armor. If they're still a coherent fighting force, they'll annihilate the Russians. The unit that ambushed us wouldn't last ten seconds against a company of M1 Abrams." Dutch felt hope rising, but also trepidation. Some good-old-fashioned revenge would go a long way toward making things right in the world, but they hadn't heard anything from Fort Carson on the short wave radio. They hadn't heard anything from any military base except Camp Lejeune on the East Coast. In this case, no news was bad news.

Sam Greaney had ordered the 4th Infantry Division to quarantine the city of Denver and to allow only "the right kind" of people out. The smell as they circled Denver was proof that the 4th Infantry Division had carried out those orders. Denver smelled like a meat locker that'd gone south. Dutch hadn't seen a single burned-out ranch house, and cattle were still grazing in the

rolling hills east of Denver. If metropolitan Denver had emptied into the countryside, there wouldn't be any surviving livestock.

Teddy picked up the handset in the Humvee and issued orders to the vehicle on point. "Head west on Squirrel Creek Road, until Link Road. Then, head south around the outskirts of Colorado City. Copy?" The vehicle confirmed and the convoy moved out.

Two miles later, as they approached a farm complex, a boxy armored truck flying a green flag rolled onto the road, blocking their path. A soldier on top, behind a machine gun, drew down on the convoy.

Dutch and his unit had been through dozens of roadblocks, but this one was different. The truck was a MAT-V armored vehicle and the guy behind the machine gun looked like he knew exactly what he was doing. This was a military checkpoint.

The convoy braked to a stop. "I'll go," Teddy offered.

"I'm coming too," Dutch said. His son looked at him with concern, but said nothing.

Father and son dropped to the road and walked up the middle of the sun-dried highway toward the MAT-V, their hands out to their sides. A soldier stepped down from the passenger seat, walked around the bumper, and met them with his rifle pointed at their feet. He wore multi-cam fatigues, and his face bristled with copious hair—a slicked-back ponytail with a beard that covered half his plate carrier vest. The soldier looked at Dutch, then Teddy, then Dutch again.

"Well shave my head and call me Hannah Montana," the soldier chirped. "If it isn't the Commander In Chief. In the flesh—and his college boy to boot."

Dutch wasn't encouraged by the warmth of the welcome. If this was what Fort Carson had become, they might be in danger. Perhaps coming anywhere near Colorado Springs had been a mistake.

The soldier eyeballed the convoy and pointed his beard at the rolling hills.

“Y’all need to know that there’s plenty-a bang-bang pointed at your column. You’re surrounded. Don’t do anything ill-advised.”

Dutch didn’t see anyone except the machine gunner. Then another Humvee appeared out of nowhere and rolled to a stop partially covered by a rise in the plain.

“See what I mean, jelly bean?” The soldier smiled around a lump of chew in his lip.

“What unit are you with?” Dutch asked.

The soldier considered the question, unhurried. “We’re 10th Group Special Forces.” He didn’t offer his name, but it was written on his chest: Daltrey. His rank was master sergeant.

“So, Master Sergeant, are you going to explain why there’s no salute?” Dutch asked.

“Ain’t that cute?” Daltrey said to his gunner. “He thinks he’s still our boss.” He turned to Dutch. “We bailed on your army when you started handing out unconstitutional orders like Halloween candy. We’re AWOL—absent without giving a fuck what you think.”

Dutch nodded. “Understood. I don’t blame you. You’re referring to the quarantine of Denver, I take it. That was a breakdown in the chain of command. My mistake.”

The soldier’s face flickered with surprise—like he’d just been told that kissing his sister wasn’t a crime. The surprise was a good sign. There was a chance Dutch could reach these men. Even just the two MAT-Vs he could see would be a force multiplier for his partisan unit. It was worth the stretch to talk it out with these men.

Dutch looked the soldier in the eye. “You refused orders illegally issued by Secretary of Defense Greaney. I removed him from office thereafter, then his men shot up my plane before I could remand his orders. We force-landed in Idaho.”

The commando blinked away his confusion and glanced back at the

bearded, camo-clad man behind the machine gun.

The gunner shrugged. “I don’t know, Hoss. It’s above my pay grade. We should take him up to Woodland, maybe?”

“Stand your column down,” Daltrey ordered the president. “I have a few questions, and I need to make a call. If you don’t mind, sir, you can hop in my rig and we’ll run you up to our forward operating base.”

The “sir” gave Dutch confidence, but going with them was a risk. They were military—Special Forces, actually—but they’d already admitted to being AWOL. Dutch nodded to his son. Teddy radioed back to the column and ordered a one hour rest stop. They climbed into the back seat of the MAT-V.

Once inside the armored truck, Daltrey apologized. “It looks like I was operating on bad intel. I should’ve given you the benefit of the doubt, seein’ as I voted for you and all.” He grinned, his teeth speckled with chew.

The MAT-V rolled to a farmhouse nearby and they dismounted. Half-a-dozen bearded commandos milled around inside the house together with a family of farmers.

“These are the Meyers. We work for them—running cattle and providing security,” the master sergeant explained. “There’s a symbiotic relationship between the farmers around here and 10th Group Special Forces. Our base of operations is up in the mountains. I need to call this in to Higher.”

Daltrey stepped away into another room and an aging rancher joined Dutch at the kitchen table. Dutch assumed it was the man’s home.

“Good to meetcha. I’m Rick Meyer. This is my place. I’d say it’s an honor sir, but I can’t say I’m glad to have voted for you.”

Dutch nodded. “I understand. Those weren’t my orders—to turn the cities into prisons.”

The rancher flicked his words away like flies. “It’s not that. You let this country take a shit on your watch. A man’s gotta be accountable for his fuck ups or he’s no man at all.”

A commando put a cup of black coffee in front of Dutch.

“True.” Dutch put his hands on the mug but didn’t drink. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m fighting to make it right.”

“Ain’t nothing going to make it right now.” The rancher got up from the table and moved on to other business, apparently something more important than a visit from the president.

“Wow. Tough crowd,” Dutch said to Teddy.

Master Sergeant Daltrey returned from a back room. “I have a few questions, sir, from my higher up.”

Dutch let himself be interrogated for half an hour while he nursed the coffee. His answers would be passed up the chain to the command of 10th Group, and could bring them back into the fold. With just one unit of Special Forces commandos, the partisans’ ability to pursue the Russians would shift radically. It wouldn’t be enough to beat the Russians decisively, but it’d be a hell of a chunk out of the apple.

During questioning, Dutch realized that he probably had the most complete picture of anyone about how the Black Autumn collapse took down the greatest civilization in human history. He made a mental note to write it down. There might not be another chance for future generations to see how society had fallen.

“Are we good?” Dutch asked when the master sergeant’s questions tapered off. “Because I have a few questions of my own.”

Daltrey nodded.

“What is the current disposition of the 4th Infantry Division and their armor?” Dutch asked.

“The 4th ID followed orders and cordoned off Denver for six weeks after the crash. 10th Group Special Forces refused that order. We withdrew into a stronghold position with our families in the mountain town of Woodland. NORTHCOM out of Peterson air base ran the containment mission for Greaney, but they fell apart within days—a lot of those guys were SOF

dudes, and they weren't keen on ordering the imprisonment of Americans. The 4th ID had their major generals replaced twice by SecDef before he found a guy who would follow his fucked up orders—pardon my French. The new dude, Major General Harmer, went at Denver with a passion."

"Where's the 4th ID now?" Dutch asked.

"They're entrenched in the city of Colorado Springs, like an occupying army. They don't have armor—their Abrams tanks were in California on a training rotation when the balloon went up—but they have plenty of Strykers. There's one on every corner in the Springs. They control all of the ranch land north of Colorado Springs and surrounding Denver. They draw from those farms for grub. We have an understanding with the 4th ID—they stick to their ten acres and we stick to ours."

Dutch's head swam. An entire Army division was still coherent. It could change everything against the Russians. An infantry division would crush them.

"The Fourth Infantry Division can fight?"

"Well, I don't know if I'd go that far…" Daltrey got a funny look on his face. "They're not exactly looking for fresh orders."

"But there's no conflict between your unit and theirs, even though you deserted?" Dutch tried to wrap his head around the situation.

The master sergeant slammed back in his chair. "We did not desert, sir. Our oath was to the Constitution."

"And to the Commander in Chief?" Dutch pushed back.

"Unless he was being a tyrannical shitbag," Daltrey spat.

Dutch chuckled. "Fair enough, Master Sergeant. You did good. You have no quarrel with me, but I need troops. We're being invaded. How can I get an audience with Major General Harmer and get the Fourth ID back in business?"

"Invaded? Who the fuck would invade us? The Canadians?"

"The Russians," Dutch said.

“Bullshit. Did they grow wings and fly across the Pacific?”

“Pretty much,” Dutch said. “They’re paratroopers. At least the ones we’ve seen. Spetsnaz.”

“Fuck me,” Daltrey swore. “No shit… Spetsnaz.” He thought about it for a second. “Our nukes, right? That’s why they’re here?”

Dutch was reminded that SF commandos were the furthest thing from dumb grunts. “That’s our guess. That’s why we need to talk to the 4th ID. We’re screwed if the Russians gain control of our nuclear arsenal.”

Daltrey exhaled his stress. “Talking to the 4th ID—I’m not sure that’s a good idea, sir. I can get you in to see Harmer, but I’m not sure you’ll get back out. Dude’s a fucking warlord.”

Dutch scrunched his brows.

Daltrey explained. “Harmer consolidated his power based on the legitimacy of following lawful orders to cordon Denver. If you stroll into the middle of the 4th ID and tell them that those orders were bullshit, Harmer might lose his grip on what remains of the division. Already, two-thirds of his men have bailed. He’s only got maybe six or seven thousand left from the twenty thousand he once had. Those soldiers deserted because the mission around Denver was shit, or because Harmer’s a dick, or because the world ended. Take your pick. Harmer’s not stupid. He’ll know his reign as King of Colorado Springs ends the moment you show up. He might not be okay with that.”

Dutch could see his point, but seven thousand soldiers in Strykers would solve the Russian problem without begging the Navajo for help. Even being at this kitchen table with loyal American commandos brought back the old certainty in Dutch—the sensation of sitting atop the most ferocious war machine on the planet. It beat the shit out of kissing Indian ass.

“I’ll go,” Teddy said. “If it’s me who walks into that meeting, Harmer won’t wig out. I can talk to the general and get a feel for things. See if there’s a work-around.”

Dutch wasn’t keen to put his son at risk. His eyes dropped to Teddy’s missing finger holding the coffee cup. Teddy followed the glance, set down the mug and tucked the one hand under the other hand.

“It’s not your call,” Teddy said. “I’m in command of the convoy, and I’ll meet with Harmer. It’s worth it.”

“What I don’t get,” Daltrey interrupted. “Is what the sneaky fucking Russians would want with our nukes.”

“Our best guess,” Dutch explained, “is that they plan on striking the Chinese from our missile fields and drawing a retaliatory strikes against us. The Chinese Army on their southern border is a significant threat to Russia. With our nuclear arsenal, they could chop the Chinese in half and it wouldn’t cost them a single Russian.”

“The Chinese would counter-strike us. Hell, they’d counter-strike Colorado Springs!” Daltrey stood up.

Dutch nodded. Ground Zero of a Chinese counter-attack would be NORAD. Everything in and around Colorado Springs would get glassed, and it could happen at any moment. They’d look up and see missile contrails in the north, burning toward China. Forty-five minutes later, all the commandos and their families hiding in the Rockies would be ash. No mountain citadel would protect them from ICBMs.

“What’s the status of NORAD?” Dutch asked.

“They’re locked up tighter than a lady’s fart box at the opera. We haven’t seen any of those guys since they slammed the blast doors three days after the collapse. I assume they’re fat and happy.”

“They probably know the Russians are trying to gain control of the Minutemen,” Dutch said, "but there’s not a lot they can do about it from inside the mountain except keep them from the launch codes, if that’s even possible.”

“10th Group can probably help you with the Russians, but it’s not going to be ‘overwhelming force,’ especially not if they have eyes in the sky and

we have jack shit for intel." Daltrey worked the tactical situation. "You're right about the 4th ID. They're the hard power in the region and they would chew up and shit out a battalion, even Spetsnaz. The Russkies can't airlift the quantity of Strykers and artillery the 4th ID can bring to bear. If you tell Harmer about the nukes, maybe that'll get him off his ass. *Maybe*."

"First things first." Dutch nodded toward the back room where he assumed they kept the radio. "Call in the new intel to your commanding officer and let's see what he says. How many Special Forces are under his command?"

Daltrey hesitated. He still didn't seem certain he could trust Dutch. At last he answered, "First battalion's stuck in Germany and the colonel offered permanent leave to any of us with family to protect. The rest of the 10th Group pulled back to Woodland. We're maybe six hundred strong, but we're not the 4th ID. We're not young soldiers. Most of us have families. We can't all deploy at once. That'd leave wives and kids in the wind. Those young spunkbags in the Fourth ID are living like pirates. They can go to war—no strings attached. They're the bastards you need for your expeditionary force up north. We can help hammer a few nails, but they're the sledgehammer."

Dutch nodded. Even two hundred commandos would multiply his fighting force by many times. He was sure he could lock down the Special Forces unit. They were still loyal Americans. Next, he'd worry about the 4th Infantry Division. He needed to load a pair of kings in his poker hand and then try for three-of-a-kind. He hated the idea, but it made sense for Teddy to feel out General Harmer.

"Where's Harmer?" Teddy asked.

"He took over some dude's mansion north 'a town." Daltrey said. "He and his wife are living the high life. If you were looking for a cake eater who would do anything to get ahead, you picked the right pony, Mr. President."

"I didn't pick him," Dutch reminded. "Greaney put his own ass-kissers up for fast-track promotion when things got squirrelly."

“Okay, but my point stands. He’s a dickhead, any way you slice it,” Daltrey said as headed for the radio room. “But I’m with you: I hope your kid can talk him into being *our* dickhead.”

SOMETHING about the 4th ID soldiers in Colorado Springs looked *off* to Teddy —their eyes were bleary, their hair poked out from under their caps, and many of them wore beanies, colored mittens and flamboyant sunglasses. It wasn’t like any Army unit he’d ever seen.

The partisan column rolled through Colorado Springs under the green flag of the 10th Group Special Forces. The two military units—the 10th Group and the 4th ID—had worked out an uneasy co-existence. The Special Forces flew a green flag over their vehicles to prevent accidental conflict with the black-flagged Strykers and Hummers of the 4th Infantry. Under the green flag, Teddy McAdam’s convoy drove past more than a dozen armored vehicles and hundreds of uniformed soldiers.

The people of Colorado Springs shuffled along the streets like citizens under a foreign occupier. They kept their eyes down and they moved with purpose, going directly from A to B. Teddy wondered what indignities the soldiers had forced on them. He hadn’t see anything in town that gave him the feel-goods about his upcoming meeting with General Harmer.

He’d insisted on taking this meeting, but Teddy was scared as hell. Not only was he worried about being taken hostage or killed, but he feared he might screw it up. Thousands of American soldiers hung in the balance and Teddy was neither a military man nor a politician.

Teddy rode in a Humvee with two Special Forces guys assigned by Daltrey. When they reached the interstate, the bulk of the partisan convoy split off and continued into the Rockies toward the town of Woodland. Teddy’s Humvee got off the highway and cut north across town. They headed

toward the posh neighborhood of Cathedral Pines and the hilltop mansion of Major General Harmer.

Having been a tag-along in the circles of the political elites since he was a lad in trousers, Teddy wasn't easily impressed by mansions, but the two commandos were awed by the palatial estates and their soaring views of Pike's Peak and the town below. The homes towered between the pines and aspens with limestone cupolas and soaring columns. Trash had piled up outside the homes and blown down the street on the wind sliding off the face of the mountains. Even now, a hapless crew of military personnel went curb-to-curb collecting refuse.

Army guards manned a Stryker at the entrance to the winding drive up to the general's house. Teddy's commandos stopped the Humvee, spoke with the infantrymen and waited while they called up to the mansion. Teddy's name, apparently, did the trick. The soldiers waved them through.

As they pulled up to the door, fifteen men surrounded the Humvee with rifles pointed in. They waved everyone from the vehicle, disarmed them and dumped their weapons back in the cab. Stripped clean of anything as threatening as a toenail clipper, Teddy and the SpecOps guys were shown inside.

Four soldiers held them at gunpoint in a white-carpeted sitting room just inside the massive, hardwood doors. Rich marble stretched beyond, through the belly of the entryway, past curving stairs to enormous bay windows looking onto Pike's Peak. Teddy looked down and grimaced. Their muddy boots were making a mess of the rug.

"We make 'em a little nervous," one of the commandos jeered in the face of the Army gunmen. "When a soldier dreams about what he wants to be when he grows up, he pictures us."

"Maybe if you had tanks, that might be true," the general remarked as he stepped out of his study and closed the door behind him. Major General Harmer stood over six-foot five inches tall, with a thin frame and a head of

wispy, white hair. He looked like a long distance runner. “From our point of view, you’re a bunch of dismounted infantry shooting 5.56. We prefer 120 millimeter.” He tilted a syrupy smile at the two commandos, but his eyes bore them contempt.

The commandos remained silent. They put their backs to the wall, standing at a modicum of “attention,” while they watched the room like Rottweilers.

“Would you join me in my office, please?” He invited Teddy with a wave of his hand that excluded the Special Forces soldiers. “If I could get you to remove your boots, that’d be wonderful.”

Teddy struggled with his boots, removed them, then padded after Harmer into his office. He realized too late that he’d just failed the first dance of dominance. Harmer was calling the shots.

Teddy stepped up to the wall to look at a picture of Harmer running the Boston Marathon. It’d obviously been placed there to impress guests. Teddy wondered who came to call, now, three months into the apocalypse. “Congratulations, sir. This was only three years ago.” Teddy tapped the glass. The general must’ve run the race when he was in his sixties.

Harmer beamed and patted his non-existent stomach. “That was many, many MREs ago.”

Teddy doubted the man had eaten a single MRE since the collapse. He had too many men at his command to eat infantry food. This guy had made himself into a warlord, and warlords didn’t consort with the hired help.

“What news from your father?” the general asked, getting down to business. “Is he well?”

“Yessir. He survived the crash of Air Force One, but Secretary Greaney, sadly, perished.”

The general moved a couple of papers around his desk. He might not give a shit about Greaney’s death, but he probably cared about how it impacted his authority.

“Such a shame.” The general shook his head and stared at a paper. “That had to be at least two months ago?” He looked up. Teddy felt like his reaction was being measured by the old bureaucrat.

“It was. Since then, we’ve been assessing the Russian invasion and assembling a military response,” Teddy told the truth. There was no reason to dissemble.

“Russian invasion?” The general’s white eyebrows shot up. He apparently didn’t believe it. “So, the Russians still exist?”

After the cordon around Denver, Harmer must’ve pulled the 4th ID back to Fort Carson. They’d tightened ranks and dominated the town instead of projecting power. Harmer wasn’t aware of the Russian invaders two hundred miles to their north. The look in the general’s eyes belied his mistake: he hadn’t extended his intelligence network far enough to detect the threat.

Teddy felt himself catching a second wind. Now Harmer was the one leaning forward. Teddy pressed. “There’s at least one battalion of Russian Spetsnaz occupying Warren Air Force base. We assume there are at least two more battalions, one in Montana and one in South Dakota. They have taken control of our ICBM silos. Our partisan unit was ambushed by a paratrooper unit seven days ago.”

“What in the devil for?” the general asked with frank amazement.

“We speculate they intend to strike the Chinese Northern Army with American missiles.”

Harmer’s eyes widened as the implications dawned. He finished Teddy’s thought. “…so that the Chinese retaliate against *us* instead of them. The Russians might do that. Those bastards invented the false flag operation.”

“NORAD would be a primary target,” Teddy added.

Major General Harmer stood up and shoved his chair away from the desk. He looked out his office window at the guards mulling around in the driveway. He seemed to reach a decision. “What can the Fourth do for our Commander in Chief? What are our orders?”

Teddy held out his hands. “I’m only the president’s son, but I believe President McAdams will call on you soon to move against the Russian invasion.” Teddy liked what he was hearing, but the general stood with his hands tucked behind his back, a plastic smile on his face.

Harmer nodded. Then he held out a handshake. “We’ll prepare. Let President McAdams know that the 4th Infantry Division is at his disposal.”

Teddy shook the hand and showed himself out of the office. He silently put his boots back on and shuffled out the door. The Special Forces commandos fell in behind him. They said nothing until they were alone, driving down the serpentine drive.

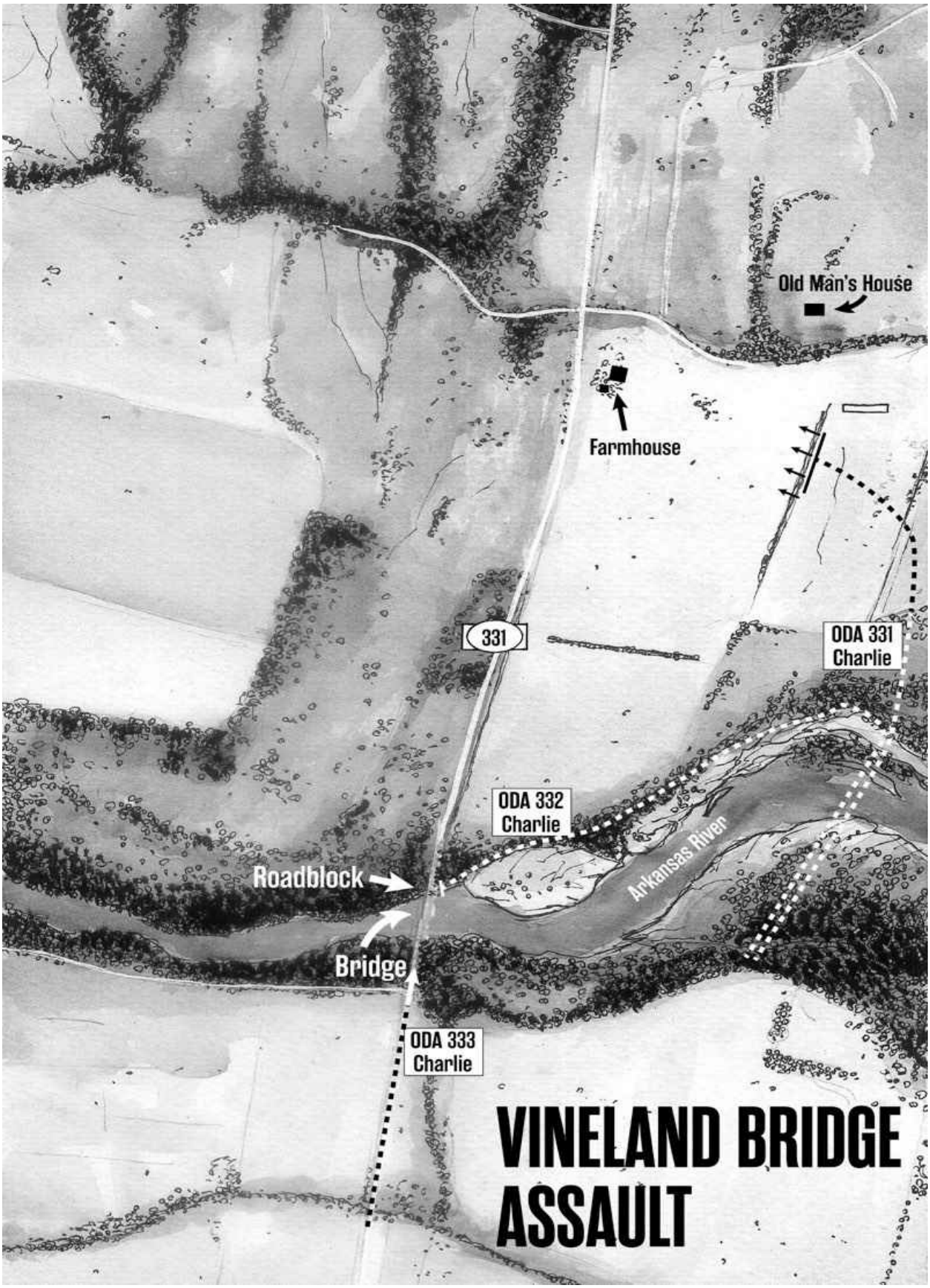
“He said yes?” Master Sergeant Billings asked with suspicion.

“Yep. Just like that. ‘What are my orders from the Commander in Chief?’ he asked. It’d been too easy. Too professional—with too few questions. Harmer knew the game better than Teddy, but Teddy had enough experience to know it wasn’t this simple. All the proper loyalties had been assured. It looked fabulous on paper. Teddy’s first mission as an ambassador had been an outstanding success, but it was all horse shit. The dance with Harmer had barely begun.

Teddy went quiet, staring out the window as the trash-strewn mansions drifted past. Sergeant Billings began a typical *Trashcanistan* story.

“Once, outside Jalalabad in ‘09, this graybeard chieftain offered to give me his daughter to seal a deal. That was literally ten minutes before he hit our vehicle with a VBID.”

Teddy didn’t know what a VBID was, but he got the point. They didn’t know much more about the 4th Infantry Division than when they’d arrived, but Harmer had placed himself exactly where he wanted to be—within striking range of the next opportunity.


Old Man's House
Farmhouse
331
ODA 331
Charlie
ODA 332
Charlie
Arkansas River
Roadblock
Bridge
ODA 333
Charlie
VINELAND BRIDGE
ASSAULT

11

Vineland Bridge
Pueblo, Colorado

Like so many times in his young life, Felipe “Pachuco” Ortíz had been caught up in something bad to avoid something worse. Most of his friends from Des Moines had linked up with the cartel, and now they fought as foot soldiers in the cartel army.

That would suck. Pachuco would rather rob travelers than play army man, any day of the week.

The cartel that controlled Pueblo weren’t Norteños—they were sworn to Tierra Caliente cartel, on loan to the Norteños in a deal struck back in Mexico before the shit went down. When the phones quit working, the Pueblos Escandalosos—the big gang in Colorado—consolidated into one, ultra-hard street army. They started with looting, moved on to rape, then they singled out and murdered the police.

Pachuco Ortíz came through town just when the Escandalosos rolled up on the police station downtown. They’d given Pachuco a choice: hit the police station with them or eat a bullet. It wasn’t much of a choice, but staying in Pueblo was probably better than continuing to Flagstaff to hook up with the Norteños. It was definitely better than eating a bullet.

With the police gone, the Escandalosos owned the city of Pueblo. At that point, Pachuco would've bailed—but the bosses made it clear: deserters would be hung upside down from the top of the Wells Fargo building, with their faces peeled back, picked at by the crows until they died.

When the food in town ran low, the gang raided the surrounding towns for fresh meat. Farming burgs like Fowler, and mountain towns like Penrose, defended their shitty little *pueblitos* like rabid dogs. The survivalist wackos had been hardening their defenses for weeks, just praying gangsters would come at them. The 'bangers had a few decent guns, but most of the *Escandalosos* ran with pistols or shotguns.

The survivalists in the farming towns hit them with scoped hunting rifles and military-style assault rifles. Turns out, those guns kick ass on city guns. Half the guys in Pachuco's group got shot trying to take down the shitty town of Penrose. The most they managed was to slip in under cover of darkness and blow holes in the bridges.

They did manage to take control of the two rural suburbs closest to Pueblo—Vineland and Pueblo West. *Escandalosos* now controlled the Pueblo reservoir, which gave them a limitless supply of fresh water.

After failing to take down small towns, the gangbangers raided every home and business in the city, consolidated the food in warehouses, and lived large as the people of Pueblo starved. That food would hold them for months, but they were running out of other things, like gas, ammunition and booze.

Since the beginning, they'd robbed fools on the road—families fleeing from Denver and Colorado Springs—and they'd scored lots of gas, booze and guns from the refugees. The bosses ordered teams to patrol along the Arkansas River, from Canon City to the Kansas state line, and blow a gap in every bridge. The four bridges they kept intact were within easy reach of Pueblo, and the gang used Pueblo as a choke point for systematic highway robbery.

As January grew long and cold in the shit-stain town of Vineland,

Pachuco manned a roadblock on a bridge across the Arkansas River. The takings had grown thin. Most days, only one or two cars tried to cross at Vineland. They were barely scoring enough to feed the crew.

Even without a decent score, the bosses wanted them to stay and hold the bridge. The Army occupied Colorado Springs with tanks and shit, and The Springs was only forty-five miles north of Pueblo. If the soldiers got a wild hair and came at them, the *Escandalosos* would be forced to fight. If the soldiers came at them heavy, with machine guns and shit, the gang was primed to roll south with all the food they could carry. The bridge at Vineland was a guard post now—part of an early warning system.

But there was no reason for the military to come at them. There was nothing in Pueblo they could possibly want. The gang had already burned through most of the supplies and it'd been three months.

Pachuco figured he'd ride out the rest of the apocalypse like this—until things got back to normal; eight hours a day on the road block, eight hours in the farmhouse, and eight hours playing cards or chasing girls.

There were worse things to do at the end of the world.

MIKA COUNTED it as a win that they were back on the road at all. President McAdams had nearly abandoned their appointment with the Navajo when Teddy returned with news that the 4th Infantry Division had agreed to go to war against the Russians. With seven thousand soldiers and Stryker armored vehicles at his disposal, the president wouldn't need the Navajo to defeat the Russian paratroopers.

But the general of the infantry division begged for time, and Teddy cautioned against trusting him. General Harmer claimed he needed at least ten days to prepare his men and machines to go north. Visiting the Navajo would require four days out and four days back, plus whatever time the

Navajo required for ceremony.

Mika argued that it was worth the travel. Marshaling the Native Americans in common cause with the remnant army of the United States gave them options for the future; a belt-and-suspenders approach to national security. She quarreled with the president—*certainly, they shouldn't keep all their eggs in the basket of a one, shaky army division?* These were the same troops that'd walled in Denver with racial profiling.

Dutch McAdams reluctantly agreed to continue on to Window Rock and the Navajo Nation, but he made it clear there were limits to what he would subject himself at the hands of the Navajo. From his perspective, this was a negotiation between nations. He would hold decorum for the United States of America.

After a day of rest and resupply, they were back on the road, and they faced their first major obstacle: the City of Pueblo. Mika, Teddy and Dutch stood back and listened as the Special Forces soldiers planned to cross the Arkansas River.

There were once seventeen intact bridges across the river between Lake Pueblo and the plains of southeastern Colorado. All but four of them had been intentionally damaged beyond repair.

The Special Forces commandos had conducted regular surveillance on the city and its gangbanger occupiers. The primary mission of 10th Group was to protect their families, not save the world. They weren't in a hurry to make war on the gang that controlled Pueblo, not with their families nestled in the Rockies.

But hitting Pueblo had always been a contingency plan, and they'd prepared for the day they might have to flee south—particularly if their "sibling rivalry" with the Fourth Infantry Division went kinetic. Special Forces soldiers were bad ass, but tanks and Strykers were an entirely different level of combat force. If General Harmer decided to roll up the mountain town of Woodland, the 10th Group would have to escape and evade, and

that’d send them south.

Pueblo, Colorado had been the epicenter of the Colorado drug trade prior to the collapse. It sat astride two major arteries: I-25 and Highway 50. The old drug trade had left Pueblo chock-a-block full of pissant drug dealers, and they’d pretty much raped the town. The expeditionary unit that accompanied the president south would’ve loved to bypass Pueblo and leave well enough alone, but going around Pueblo wasn’t a reasonable option. The gangs had gone out of their way to make it nearly impossible.

The 10th Group commander in Woodland, Colonel Devlin, had ordered four ODAs—forty-eight Special Forces operators—to accompany the president and the partisan unit to their rendezvous with the Navajo at Window Rock.

To Mika, it seemed like a tremendous fighting force. The bearded men, bristling with weapons and experience, multiplied their unit strength. The backs of the Special Forces fighting trucks were filled with rockets, mortars, machine guns and ammunition. The Special Forces colonel had taken the protection of his Commander in Chief seriously.

With four turreted MAT-Vs, four Humvees and eighteen pickup trucks and vans, the president’s convoy wasn’t going to slip around the gangs of Pueblo without a fight. The 10th Group commandos insisted that they’d have to punch the gangbangers in the mouth, then race across the river while they reeled from the blow. From Mika’s point of view, they seemed a bit too eager, but they’d be killing rapists and marauders. So be it.

Mika and the partisans were relegated to rear security in the upcoming assault, so she sat back and worried about what they’d encounter when they got to Window Rock. She had no idea what the Navajo Nation wanted from Dutch McAdams. The unit’s mobile ham radio had failed to make contact with Duck Valley for over a week.

The Navajo were Native Americans, but they weren’t Paiute. Mika didn’t always understand their culture, and she couldn’t predict what they would

want. In some ways, the Navajo were like the Far Right of the native tribes—they had their own creation stories, tradition and ethics that didn't always sync with the other cultures. Many Navajo still believed in the prophecy that the world would end when women wore hats and took leadership. That'd always been a head-scratcher for Mika—how they were supposed to practice feminism in the shadow of prophecies that painted it as the darkest evil?

The Navajo could be eternally stubborn, convinced of their role as "The People" and the stewards of the land. She didn't know what she was supposed to do if they dug in their heels with President McAdams. How would she bring them back together? She wasn't particularly friendly with either side. It felt like her grandfather had dumped an impossible responsibility in her lap.

Native Americans were good at waiting for the result they wanted. If the president wouldn't join the Navajo in their sacred trust of the land, they'd be content to wait another hundred years. But according to Sagehen, it might be twenty generations—five hundred years—before they'd have another shot.

What was she supposed to do if the Navajo were hell bent on blowing it? With the end-of-the-world at their feet, the Navajo would probably be convinced that feminism had screwed them all. How was Mika supposed to influence the outcome of the coming meeting when they believed that outspoken women caused the apocalypse?

While the Special Forces soldiers hashed out their plan to run a spear through the flank of Pueblo, Mika fretted about her own, upcoming struggle. The fate of the world rested on the shoulders of the twenty-seven-year-old girl, and to top it off, the Navajo would probably insist she keep her mouth shut.

"Damn you, Grandfather," she mumbled to herself. "I hope you know what you're doing."

FORTY COMMANDOS, Teddy and Dutch, clustered around a drawing sketched in the dirt. They were parked in a wagon circle in a parking lot next to a motor speedway to plan the assault on the bridge. It was late afternoon, and if they went any closer to Pueblo, they might run into gang patrols.

“We could always go up the 115 over the mountain,” one of the commandos suggested.

“Naw. They blew the bridges in Cañon City. Plus it’d take us a week to plow through the snow to get over the passes.”

“Then smash-mouth basketball it is,” the commando agreed. “What are we going to do about the *indig* warriors?” He looked up and locked eyes with Teddy McAdams. “They don’t have the training for this.”

“We’ve been training for two months,” Teddy offered. He had no desire to face bullets again, but there was no question as to his duty.

“Two whole months?” Daltrey and his commandos belly-laughed. Daltrey continued, “Hats off to Colonel Brooks for putting you through the paces, but we’ll be rolling blacked-out on NVGs. We’ve done this a lot. Your team hasn’t. If we throw more guys at the problem, we’re going to end up shooting each other just as sure as granny wears ugly underpants. This isn’t the first time we’ve worked with indigenous forces. If we pop them into the meat grinder with us, in the dark, we know how that story ends. We’ll take you and your dad, but all your other dudes need to go on rear security.”

“I’m sure you know what you’re doing.” Teddy looked at the sand model they’d made on the ground. He couldn’t sit this one out. He’d take every chance he could get to work with the pros, even if it meant risking injury or death.

He’d faced the enemy, run into gunfire, and saved his father. This was his life now. Combat. He was hell-bent on distinguishing himself. It was time to step up and show his father what kind of man he’d become.

The operators’ plan was to assault the Vineland bridge at night. It was going to be “colder than a bucket of snowman piss” as one commando put it.

The master sergeant pointed to the features in the map with a long dogwood stick.

“Fresh recon from last night puts twelve men on the south side of the bridge behind two rows of cars—like rolling road blocks for when they catch people in their spider web. Another twenty-five gangbangers are a quarter mile away at this farmhouse here, yanking on their babymakers, catching shuteye and getting drunk.” Someone had thought it was funny to use a box of condoms as the farmhouse in the model. “ODA 331 Charlie will ford the river on-foot at 0100 hours and circle the empty field around to here, where they will come online and standby to destroy the farmhouse at 0300 hours with a dismounted 240 and a few 249 SAWs.”

One of the men blew through his teeth, “This sounds like a plan for how to get hypothermia.”

“Yeah, you best leave at zero hundred forty-five so you have time to change out your wet ones to a pair of extra pants and socks once you get across the river and under cover of trees.”

Teddy made a mental note to pack an extra pair of thermals, as well as fresh fatigues. He didn’t want to be the guy chattering like a ball bearing in a coffee grinder. Standing with these guys—men who’d been in hundreds of assaults—he felt totally out of his league. He was terrified that he’d screw up and let them down.

“You ever use night vision before?” The master sergeant must’ve sensed Teddy’s apprehension.

“Yeah. A couple times in training on the reservation. We only had four pair, but Colonel Brooks had us all try them out,” Teddy replied.

“You’ve seen action. You’ll do fine.” He clapped Teddy on the shoulder. “Carry extra ammo for Turd Sack and stick right by his side.”

Teddy looked over at a big commando. The name strip over his chest read “Terstadt.” The guy smiled and waved.

“ODA 332 will cross sixty minutes after, at the same fjord, change their

panties, then move up the riverbank to a flanking position alongside the roadblock, here. I'll roll with them and call the play at approximately o-three hundred if all's well."

"What about 330 Charlie?" a guy asked from the ranks. He stepped forward.

"Five miles downriver at La Crosse Ave, there's another intact bridge with a roadblock. Drop mortar rounds on it ten minutes prior to action on our objective. Don't worry too much about putting rounds in the barrel, just make a mess and give us some cover for action. Then haul ass east to our position, cross the river behind us and catch up. We'll get everyone calmed down at this junkyard, three miles south of Pueblo. Meet us there at 0330. If you get stuck on the other side of the river because the gangbangers fill in behind us, just head back to Colorado Springs and call it a day. We'll catch you on the flip side. We can do this mission with three ODAs if we have to. Copy?"

"Why don't we just hit the Vineland bridge with the 60mm mortar?" another commando asked.

Daltrey rubbed his beard. "We're afraid we'll fuck up the blocking vehicles if we hit them with mortars, and then we'll have to drag them out of the way. Two of 'em are delivery trucks and if they burn down to the axles, it'll take too much time to drag them. We need to pop smoke no more than fifteen minutes after we go loud. The gangbangers will send reinforcements from Pueblo when they figure out we got our fingers in their frijoles. I don't want the blocking vehicles to be ten-ton charcoal briquettes."

The men waited in professional silence for the team leader to organize his thoughts.

"Okay, that leaves ODA 333 Charlie—you ten boys standby with the gun trucks and hit the bridge right down the middle with the 240s mounted on the MAT-Vs. By then, we should be mopping up from the short leg of the 'L' ambush. I'll give you the signal to shift fire, and we'll assault through the road block from the downriver side to the upriver side. You clear,

Brickhouse?”

“Got it.” Brickhouse repeated his orders, “We hose them down the long axis with the ‘40s, then shift fire on your command.”

“No guarantee that 331 will get all the squirters from the No-tell Motel a quarter mile up the road, so we need to pucker up tight after we cross the bridge and push through to the rally point. There could be stragglers in the woods—probably on the east side of the road. Questions?” Daltrey wrapped up.

“Yeah,” one of the commandos raised a hand. “Who’s handling VIP protection duty?”

The implication was clear—why were the president and his son coming? Why, at the end of the world, were they pandering to politics? This was an assault, not a dog and pony show.

“Good question.” Daltrey nodded appreciation for the man’s honesty. “Mr. President. You can speak for yourself.”

Teddy’s father stepped into the circle. “Gentlemen, I’m not going to slow you down. If I do, leave me behind. I’ve trained for three months; I run a 7:10 mile, I can do ten pull ups, thirty push ups, and I’ve been in two firefights in the last month. We lost thirty-one men in a battle five days ago. I’ve been shot and I’ve killed men in combat. I’d like to be on a fire team with Master Sergeant Daltrey. I hope that’s okay. If not, tell me straight and I’ll stay with rear security, but I’m done being the man who lets men like you take all the risks.”

Teddy tried to see his father through the eyes of the commandos, and what he saw surprised him. His father looked hard around the edges. He came off like a well-used saddle, worn and burnished in all the right places. Combat agreed with his father’s physical health. He’d grown ten years younger in the last three months.

“Well, I hope you’re not planning on carrying that big-ass rifle,” one of the commandos joked about Dutch’s fancy sniper rifle. They all laughed.

“That big sonofabitch would drag you straight to the bottom of the river.”

These soldiers weren’t East Coasters, and they weren’t possessed of east coast sensibilities. Most of them looked like Boston homeless dressed in fatigues. But in these men, his father had placed great hope. Combat was the reality in this winter of American history. Dutch McAdams had gone from being a meticulous politician to a guerrilla fighter, and Teddy finally saw it—and he saw his own future. The times were not only remaking his father, they were remaking him.

EIGHT HOURS LATER, on the far riverbank, Dutch McAdams clawed at his ice-cold pants. They had already stiffened with the wet of the river, and his numb legs felt like ghost limbs. He and the rest of the men quietly tore off their wet pants, socks and underwear and traded them for dry clothes from their packs. They were a half-mile downriver from the bridge, tucked under the moonless shade of the towering cottonwoods.

They had plenty of time to tend to the cold. It was 2:00 am and the strike wouldn’t be for another hour. They’d crossed the river and now they crawled through a half-mile of riverside forest, slowly and deliberately. Each man folded his wet clothing and slid it back into his assault pack. They’d leave nothing behind.

Dutch had only a few hours of training with night vision goggles, so they’d given him a bump helmet with a single-tube PVS 14. With one tube over his left eye and his right eye free, he could see close and far at the same time. It made him queasy at first, especially crossing the river, but as the team reassembled in a wedge-shaped formation, and pushed deeper into the woods, Dutch got the hang of the green-lit tunnel in front of him.

The crescent moon appeared from behind a cloud, and the brambles sprang alive with the added light. Through the night vision, the moonlight

cast crisp, convoluted shadows. Dutch covered his sector of fire with the barrel of his M4 rifle, but he doubted he'd be able to pick out a man wearing camouflage. The dappled moonlight made every-damn-thing look like jungle pattern camouflage in the green glow of the night vision.

When Master Sergeant Daltrey set Dutch up earlier that afternoon, he'd told him, "NVGs help you to see the other guy first, but that's not the main advantage. It's this." He tapped the boxy device on top of the suppressed M4 rifle. "This baby casts an IR laser beam that can only be seen through the night vision. Put this laser pointer on whatever you want dead and pull the trigger. Shazam! Magical Nighttime Death Beam. It's so unfair, it's almost sad. Also, when you see one of these light sabers waving around in your night vision, you know that's your pal. Don't shoot in that direction. You follow me? By watching our lasers wave around in the forest, our gun trucks on the other side of the river will know where we are. We all got these on the back of our helmets, too." Daltrey tapped the IR reflective square on the back of Dutch's helmet. "Don't shoot nobody if they got one of these on the back of their melon. In fact, don't shoot nobody unless you're one thousand percent sure he's not one of us. Got it?"

Back in daylight, Dutch thought it seemed pretty self-explanatory. At night, scared out of his mind, he remembered how many times he'd shot his own guys with the training rifles. The speckled moonlight and the rush and gurgle of the river deprived him of half his senses, and everything in the NVGs glowed a staticky green. He couldn't imagine how he'd ever be "one thousand percent sure" he was shooting at an enemy and not a friend. He felt thankful for the extra time they'd given themselves to reach the rally point and get used to the NVGs. If Dutch had to do this in a hurry, he was sure he'd fuck it up.

They reached an open patch in the forest and the team spread out in a circle to rest and wait for go-time. Daltrey had two IR patches side-by-side on the back of his bump helmet, so Dutch followed those. He and the master

sergeant settled against a tall stump. No one said a word. This final rally point was a hundred yards from the roadblock, and the biggest threat now would be dogs. The ODA team had discussed it ahead of time: there was no good way to silently kill a dog. If you shot them, even with a suppressor—they usually made more noise than if you'd just let them chew on you. By standing off a hundred yards from the roadblock, they hoped to avoid getting crossways with guard dogs.

Dutch leaned against the tree and closed his eyes. He was the furthest thing from sleepy, but he'd learned from force-on-force training ops—anything he could do to get his blood pressure down, his respiration in-check and his mind relaxed would pay dividends when the mad minute came around. A calm trigger-puller was ten times the weapon as a guy all-jacked-up on Mountain Dew.

It was fifteen minutes before go-time, and those fifteen minutes would drag on forever.

TEDDY THOUGHT OF HIS TEAM—OPERATIONAL Detachment Alpha 331–as being out of harm's way. Their mission was to hose down the house where the gangbangers slept, and they were to do it from four hundred yards away across a plowed field. They'd be a quarter mile from the bad guys, almost like a bomber dropping ordnance on the enemy. But now, as they emerged from the tree line and onto the open field, he felt naked as a sleepwalker at church.

The men of ODA 331 set up their machine guns along a hundred yard line, extending north to south. When the moment came, they'd pour several thousand rounds into the sleeping farmhouse. It was visible across the field—a blocky cluster of shadows in their NVGs. When they first arrived, they painted the place with a dozen IR lasers, then they clicked them off and

waited in the wet dirt and patchy snow.

Teddy took a moment to ask God for forgiveness for what they were about to do. The men in that structure would come awake in the maw of hell. There was a possibility that there were innocents inside. Locals might spend the night with the gangbangers, willingly or not. But it couldn't be helped. If Teddy and his friends were to save the region from a nuclear attack, this was one of the prices they'd have to pay. People were going to get in their way, and those people needed to be removed.

"Ten minute warning," Teddy's earbud crackled. On the mark, five miles away, mortar rounds began hitting the downriver bridge with a muted thump and thunder. Teddy hoped it didn't wake the sleeping criminals.

The shade of green in his night vision goggles flickered. Teddy scanned and found a starburst of artificial light coming from a house atop a knoll to the south of their position. A dog bark drifted across the field. The house on the hill was even farther away than the farmhouse but it was on their flank. Nobody had said anything in the recon report about a house with a solar-powered floodlight. To Teddy's eye, it looked like a serious problem. There weren't supposed to be any gangbangers outside the two locations they'd scouted: the bridge and the farmhouse. The few homes on the escarpment over the river shouldn't be threats, but the light and the barking dog were fast becoming a concern. Anyone on guard duty at the farmhouse would see the light and hear the dog.

"Handle that!" Sergeant Terstadt hissed at Teddy.

He and Terstadt were on the far end of the firing line. Their 240 machine gun was mounted on a tripod with two cases of belted ammunition beside it. Terstadt's primary job was the big gun. Teddy was the obvious guy to handle loose ends.

"What do I do?" he flipped up his NVGs and whispered back.

"Work the problem," Turd Sack rasped. "And don't get in front of our firing line."

Teddy and Terstadt were closest to the house on the hill. Nobody else was going to handle it. Teddy lowered his NVGs and charged up the embankment.

“Charlie One, this is Overwatch. Who’s running up the embankment like Iwo Jima?”

“That’s Baby Eagle, Overwatch. Status on the house with the light?”

“We got an old man coming outside. He’s armed. Maybe a shotgun. He’s got a dog. Should I engage him?” the sniper asked.

“Negative. We still have six minutes. Give Baby Eagle three more mics.”

Teddy heard it all on the radio, but he couldn’t respond. He gulped for breath as he crested the top of the seventy-foot rise and shot out into the old man’s yard.

“Who’s out there?” the old man shouted and waved a long-barreled shotgun in Teddy’s direction. “I’ve got a gun!”

“Please…sir...Be Quiet.” Teddy heaved for breath. He jumped behind an old apple tree and tried to make himself skinny. “Please don’t shoot. I’m with the U.S. Army.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

BOOM! the shotgun rang out.

Teddy felt a half-dozen scorching welts bloom on his thigh. His IR laser danced across the man’s chest, but he didn’t shoot.

“You here to take my preps?” the man roared. “You come in the dark of night and think you can trample my rights?” *BOOM!*

Teddy curled into the shape of the tree trunk, and this time none of the pellets broke skin.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment, you jack-booted bastards. Come and get it. Come pry my gun from my cold dead fingers.”

A light in the gangbanger farmhouse flicked on. The IR lasers from the ODA lit up and the belt-feds opened fire on the gangbanger farmhouse, three minutes early. The night exploded in the roar of a dragon. The field below

Teddy lit up like a string of Christmas lights.

The old man and his dog went from *Belligerence Level Ten* to tucking tail and scurrying inside the house. The grumpy old man apparently hadn't planned on the government coming for him with belt-fed machine guns.

The guns weren't for the old man and his dog, but he'd tripped the switch on the farmhouse early. Teddy rushed back to the edge of the escarpment and threw himself behind cover. He watched the farmhouse being dismantled, splinter by splinter. He located a door on the side facing him, three hundred yards away, and held his IR beam steady in the doorframe.

In the night vision glow, even from three hundred yards away, he could see building materials being stripped off the structure in a ragged haze. Thousands of rounds tore through the structure from keel to stern, blasting out the far side in plumes of dust. It seemed nothing could survive that destruction—but human beings die hard.

The side door burst open and Teddy opened fire on the silhouettes of men. Three dropped within a few steps. Others burst out the front stoop and ran for the cover of the forest. The overwatch rifle barked from high ground atop a hill to Teddy's east. The men toppled.

The chimney of the farmhouse tilted, then fell over onto a Cadillac.

The half-collapsed house flickered with light, and then caught fire. The machine guns quieted. The overwatch rifle continued to sound, then it fell quiet too.

"All stations. This is Charlie One. Report."

Teddy's leg burned like he'd been stabbed repeatedly with a whiskey-dipped ice pick, but he decided not to make a thing of it.

"This is Thirteen. I'm good," he spoke into the mic when it was his turn.

"If I'm not mistaken," the overwatch guy said over the radio, "I think Baby Eagle got his cherry popped by Grampa. I do believe I saw a little hitch in his get-along when he ran for it. Did that old bastard shoot you in the dick with his pheasant gun?"

“A little,” Teddy admitted over the radio. The guys laughed into their mics. Their job was done for now.

The bridge, a quarter mile down the road, thundered with machine gun fire.

“THEY WENT EARLY,” Daltrey grumbled to Dutch McAdams. “Something went wrong.”

“We’re going,” Daltrey said over the team radio. “Execute, execute, execute.”

The gun trucks blazed ropes of livid thunder across the bridge. Tracers streaked over the roadway and sliced through the gangster vehicles. Like dying stars, ricochets winged, tumbled and looped in all directions. Dutch never imagined a bullet’s honest flight could be so corrupted, but seeing it in the dark through NVGs, it couldn’t be denied. Tracer rounds smashed into metal and rock, then flipped in every direction.

Master Sergeant Daltrey charged up to a cottonwood trunk as thick as an old man’s soul. He leaned around it as streaks of orange flashed through the metal of the cars and trucks on the bridge. A tracer round from the MAT-Vs hit something hard, and ricocheted angrily into the cottonwood in front of the master sergeant’s face. The bark exploded and the man’s head jerked back with a grunt.

Daltrey’s stance barely shifted as he leaned back into the tree and unleashed hell from his AR-15. Dutch peered around the other side of the tree and followed the glow of his IR laser as it caressed the shiny angles of the vehicles, seeking flesh. Dutch found a bobbing head and dumped three rounds into the short-cropped hair of what could only be a gangbanger. The man flopped on the hood, slid below and disappeared.

Dutch’s laser beam found another man, fleeing into the forest on the far

side. His beam crossed with another beam and they both fired into the running shape. He disappeared headlong into the undergrowth.

Dutch craned around the tree, seeking more targets. He saw nothing but crisis-crossing lasers.

The team's belt-fed fell silent, and the master sergeant's ragged voice barked in his earbud. "Assault through the target in five seconds."

A bolt of terror struck Dutch; certainly they weren't being asked to walk into the deadly machine gun fire of the gun trucks.

Daltrey called "shift fire" into his command channel. Two seconds before they assaulted, the tracer fire from the MAT-Vs lifted and angled into the tree line. Dutch's unit jumped from cover and pushed up onto the roadbed in a line, rifles shouldered.

Sporadic gunfire rattled from Dutch's friends, but none came from the criminals behind the roadblock. They'd been scythed down in two, overlapping angles. Only the wounded and dead remained.

The gangbangers lay sprawled behind the vehicles and trucks; slumped, folded and curled into the unnatural posture only the dead could take. Dutch ignored the horror and searched for threats.

When he reached the far side of the road, the forest lay beyond. Following anyone into that mess—where the NVGs muddled—would be a much riskier deal.

"Get behind cover, Mr. President," Daltrey gurgled. "There's squirters in those trees."

Dutch crouched behind the rear panel of a vehicle, refocused his night vision tube, and looked at Daltrey's ruined face. A chunk of wood almost a foot long stuck under his jaw and out his cheek. Blood bubbled around the edges and drenched his shirt.

"You're hit," Dutch said.

"No shit…sir." Daltrey responded with a ghoulish smile that wrapped around the stick. He spoke into his command radio, calm as coffee on Sunday

morning, “333 Charlie—move the MAT-Vs up and get us out of here. We need a ride. The gangbanger QRF is probably on its way. We pop smoke in five mics.”

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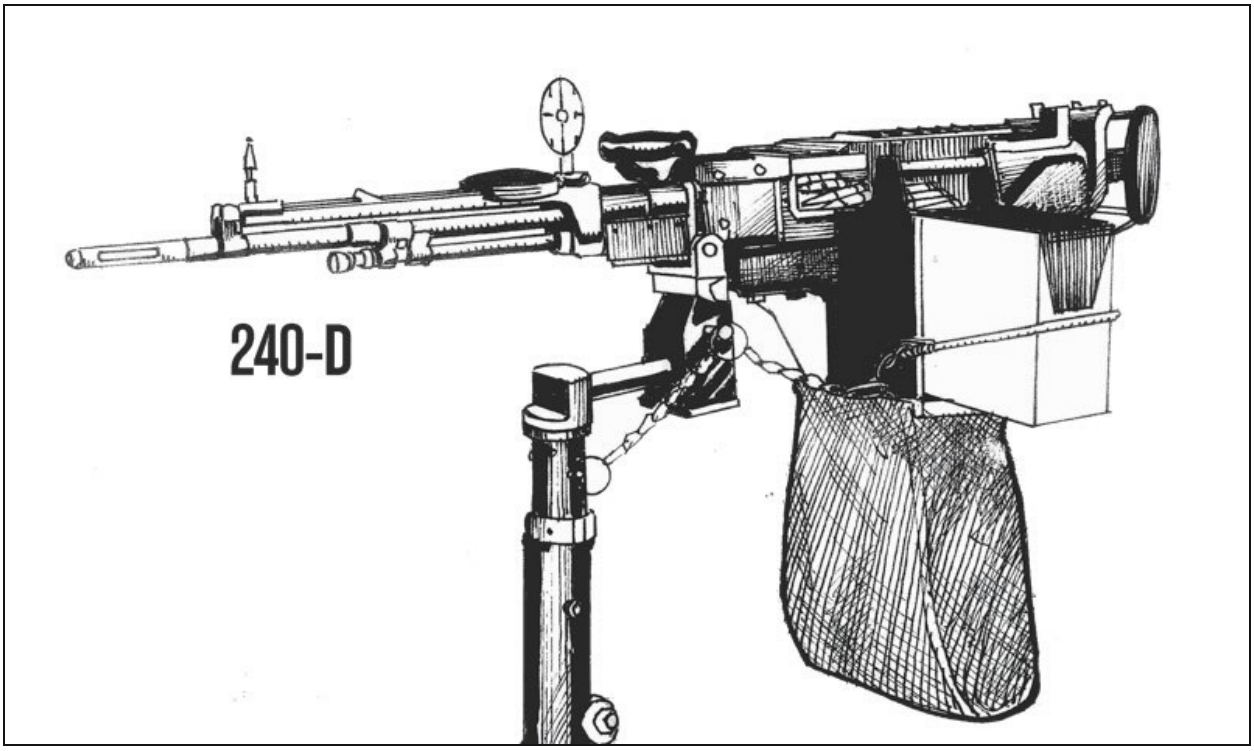

Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

In hard numbers, Bethany killed 97 North Carolinians for a 24.65% chance at saving 5,670,896 people over the next two hundred years. What kind of monster wouldn't sacrifice 97 to save 5.7 million?

She did her best to minimize the number of people killed, but at least a hundred people would die as she slowed the coolant flow rate on the McGuire nuclear power plant on Lake Norman, North Carolina and caused a steady reactor meltdown. It happened without the slightest stir of grass or shuffle of feet. Nonetheless, it was a massive movement—trillions of bits of information; almost the entire knowledge base of the human race moved behind the radioactive plume and into the Apple iCloud server farm. She built a life boat for Glinda and sent a version of her to live there, but it came at a cost—the server farm and its solar field would be protected by a cloud of death.

She executed the process with a few keystrokes, and three hours later, two thousand miles away, a mile-high cloud of radioactive steam billowed skyward. It blew inland on the offshore breeze, across the town of Maiden, North Carolina.

Bethany tripped the emergency sirens and triggered civil disaster warnings ahead of the toxic cloud, but she knew from satellite surveillance that the people downwind of the reactor were probably out of gas, starving and would have great difficulty getting out of the way. Human suffering was the price for Glinda to live another two hundred years.

Bethany justified the sacrifice. The hundred must die so that millions would live. It was the only way to preserve the core of Glinda the Good Witch and give the future a chance at restoring basic computer technology, lifesaving pharmaceuticals and the bulk of scientific knowledge. They would launch satellites, rebuild the iPhone and map the human genome again someday.

The radioactive plume and the ongoing trickle of radioactive isotopes turned the acreage east of Lake Norman into a no-man’s land that entirely covered the massive Apple Computer server farm and its city-size solar field. Apple’s drowsy iCloud would be Glinda’s heart.

The Apple facility shared a fiber-optic link across the Atlantic Ocean with

the Advania server farm in Keflavik, Iceland. It was powered by geothermal vents below the lava flows of the island. Glinda's soul was not only fully backed-up, but mirrored and co-located.

Whatever happened next between the American president, the Native Americans, the Russians, and the Chinese, Glinda would hide from the back-blast, bide her time, then resurrect.

THE PARTISANS, the ODA, Teddy and his dad waited outside the junkyard rally point on Highway 331. Dawn crept over the featureless prairie to the east. The sun barely colored the cool grays of the socked-in clouds.

"Are you okay, dad," Teddy asked his father.

"No new injuries this time." Dutch smiled in the scant light. He looked exhausted. Staying up all night was not a good look on him. "How about you?"

Teddy answered, "I did get shot, if you can call it that." He poked a finger through a bloody, BB hole in his pants. "I'm going to need a little medical attention when we get away from Pueblo. An old guy blasted me with his scattergun for trespassing. He thought I was from the government or something, so he shot me."

His father looked at him with deep concern. "I thought you were carrying ammo for the crew-served. How the heck did you get shot?"

"The guy's dog woke up, raised a ruckus. I tried to talk the old man down," Teddy explained.

His dad examined the speckled wounds on his son's leg. "Doesn't look like he was buying it."

"Not at all." Teddy laughed. "He doesn't think very highly of your government."

His dad shook his drooping head. "It's not my government now. I don't

know how it got this bad—how Americans started seeing each another as the enemy. Maybe that's what happens when you go a long time without another country trying to kick your butt. At least Reagan had the Soviets. A few decades after they were gone, we started thinking of one another as commies and tyrants. Here lies America," his dad pronounced. "She died of boredom."

Teddy didn't like hearing his dad talk like that. It was scary. Mortal-sounding. Teddy preferred to think of his father as eternal and immovable, but the man he saw now in the sickly dawn seemed frankly depressed.

"How about you tell me what really happened?" Teddy probed.

"Hmm." The president shrugged. "I killed a kid, and my commander took a chunk of frag through the face. Pretty average, shitty outcome."

"Is Daltrey all right?" Teddy asked.

"He's probably not going to play himself in the TV series, if that's what you mean. A ricochet ruined his face—shoved a chunk of cottonwood through his jaw. He kept fighting like it was nothing. He almost bled out, there at the end. The mag pouches in his vest are full to the brim with blood."

Teddy blanched.

"Let me see your leg." His dad motioned for him to drop his pants.

Teddy popped off his battle belt, undid his pants and caught them before they piled on the wet ground. "Eight or ten pellets, s'all."

"You could die from that. Don't underestimate infection," his dad fretted.

"I'll have Mika look after it. We still have some amoxicillin from Wind River, I think." Teddy rubbed the leg lightly. The area around the pellets felt hot, like a sunburn. Luckily, the old man shot from a distance. Some of the pellet strikes hadn't even penetrated the fabric of his pants. They'd still left welts. "And the kid you shot?"

His dad waved at the air like it was no big deal, but his eyes took on the ashy sadness of the sky. "He was nineteen, maybe twenty. He was trying to hide from the bullets behind a hatchback Honda. I shot him in the head, and he went down hard. When I pushed through, I found him in a pool of his own

blood. I couldn't believe how much—ten feet across…I couldn't stop thinking about the thousands of hours his mother invested in him; teaching him how to cut a steak, brush his teeth, send his grandmother a card on her birthday. She spent all that time, showing that kid how to be an adult, and I poured it out on the ground like a tipped-over jug of molasses. What a waste. This whole country. What a waste."

Teddy put his hand on his dad's shoulder. "There wasn't anything you could've done." He meant the boy, and the country too. He didn't believe his dad had much to do with the collapse, if anything. The nation's failures played out on a stage jam-packed with three hundred million self-absorbed thespians. No one man could be called "the director."

Dutch rubbed his eyes. "I was the guy who could've stopped this from happening. I missed my chance."

"That's absurd, Dad. We were attacked. "

The president shook his head. "But that didn't have to end us. We set the table for this collapse by hating on each other. We weakened ourselves. We spent decades stewing, and when our enemies landed a lucky punch, we didn't have the fortitude to get up off the mat. I caused more than my share of it—I said things about my political opponents I shouldn't have said, I approved campaign ads that were petty. I got mad just like everyone else. I stopped looking at my opponents as people."

"You need to stop," Teddy said. "You're tired." In his gut, though, he wasn't sure his dad was wrong. There'd been times when his dad took ugly shots at the "other guy." Teddy remembered feeling twinges of embarrassment when his father stooped low—when he'd let his self-righteousness get the better of him.

He also knew that Dutch McAdams had been the best of them. He'd been the classiest politician in a congress full of cheats. If the other guy had won the presidency instead of his dad, it would've been worse.

"I'm sorry about the kid you had to shoot, Dad. I'm sorry he was at that

roadblock robbing people. I'm sorry they forced us to fight."

The president nodded and said nothing. He collected his bump helmet and rifle. He looked around the stack of tires he'd been sitting on to make sure he hadn't left anything.

His dad stepped over and gave Teddy a long hug around the clanking magazines and metal clutter between them. He patted Teddy on the back of the neck, turned, and walked away alone.

"WHERE'S YOUR DAD?" Mika asked when she found Teddy seated on a stack of tires. She'd been on rear security with the partisans. The bulk of their unit had seen and heard the battle from a distance. Now, she darted around the rally point administering minor first aid and checking on friends.

"I'm fine, thank you," Teddy snarked with an edge to his voice.

Teddy had never been impatient with her before, but by his tone she could tell he was exhausted, and maybe sad. His left leg was dark with blood. "Were you injured?"

He pointed at his left thigh. "I've got a few pellets in my leg that need to be removed when the sun comes up."

She realized he was serious. He'd actually been shot. "Crap. Okay. I'll get the med kit."

"It'll keep for a minute. Were you looking for my dad?"

"Yeah, I want to make sure we're still on our way to the Navajo." She worried that the president would change his mind. She'd seen the bodies around the broken roadblock when they passed. There was no denying the trip to Window Rock was costing them. The president didn't know what was actually at stake, and she'd taken it upon herself to push to get him to the Navajo. No one else but her knew that if they didn't take their fate in hand, white men and natives would end up at war.

“Back off a bit, Mika,” Teddy said with an edge. “Not everything happens according to your plan. My dad’s not available for lobbying right now. He needs sleep. He’s not doing well.” Teddy had never spoken to her like that before.

“I mean...I guess, I just wanted to check on him,” she sputtered.

Teddy spoke without lifting his head. “He’s not available to be checked upon. Catch up with him this afternoon, please. He and I both need sleep. Actually, I need this birdshot out of my leg, then I need sleep.”

“Okay. I’ll get the alcohol and the med kit,” she repeated. He nodded in agreement. Mika turned, flustered a moment, then headed toward the med van.

DUTCH DIPPED in and out of fitful sleep for ten hours. The Master Sergeant’s second in command took control of the convoy after Pueblo. His son slept, curled up, in the back of the Humvee.

The convoy opted for a series of county roads that jogged south and west toward the backside of the Apache, then Navajo lands. They avoided the cities of Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

Dutch had been almost eager to make war on Russian invaders. Killing an American boy was another matter entirely.

Many men and women had been killed on his authority during his time as president. They’d all been foreign nationals intent on taking American life. Dutch was well aware of the brutal realities of governing three hundred thirty million people. Folks broke the law and sometimes they were killed. It happened every day, and he hadn’t lost a lot of sleep over it, until now.

One of the main jobs as president was to even out what sociology eggheads called “HILFs”—high-impact, low frequency events. In other words, black swans. They happened all the time: natural disasters, financial

wobbles, hacker attacks, novel viruses. A good government absorbed the impact of those events and spread it around so no single part of the country was fatally wounded from an isolated crisis. Never had a black swan event taken down the entire country, because every one of Dutch's predecessors held tight to the wheel and steered the country through.

Dutch would love to blame circumstances, but he'd been the man at the helm; the primary decision maker and the sole person who could've prevented this. He was slow to halt trading on the stock market. He'd hesitated to send in troops to end the rioting in California. He'd missed Greaney's manipulation of the military. It'd all been on Dutch. So many missteps. A nobler man might've killed himself by now. A Japanese president would've committed seppuku and a Russian premiere would've shot himself at his desk with his Makarov pistol.

But Dutch wasn't a man to take the coward's way out. Instead, he would endure the weight of his mistakes. He'd stare at his cowardice and weakness until it burned an indelible image in his mind. It was the least he could do for the boy's mother—and the mothers of all the dead children.

His suffering was deserved and it was good. He faced forward and prepared himself to be further diminished by the nitpicking of the Navajo. They would try to take their share from the bones of the United States, and demand that the country mortgage its future even further down this dark alley. While Russians prepared to use the Midwest as a nuclear punching bag, the Navajo would roll out their old grievances and demand the gravedigger's fee.

Dutch had never been to the Navajo reservation, but he'd faced Native American politicians as a state congressman and as a U.S. senator. In his experience, they played fast and loose with the victim card, and they never missed the chance to take a stab at the white man.

Dutch hardened his eyes out the window of the Humvee as the Southwest scrolled past and the convoy closed the last hundred miles before his

confrontation with the Navajo.

One of the few upsides of being ruined was that he had nothing to lose. The United States had been backed into a hard corner. There were negotiating advantages that came with utter desperation. For damn sure, Dutch would suffer no fools.

THE APOCALYPSE STORY OF THE ANAASÁZÍ

(ANCIENT NAVAJO MYTHOLOGY)

The story of man runs like water down the river. It rushes forward, full of itself, then quiets into a lake. It rises up into the clouds, forgets, then falls again to the ground as rain, only to repeat the mad rush to where it

began. History is a wheel through time. It flows the same channels, runs across the same pebbles and refills the same lakes it once drained.

THE ANAASÁZÍ PEOPLE were numerous as red ants. They owned large farms, spacious houses and many game animals. They arrogantly showed their fine baskets and pottery and carelessly mixed sacred symbols with the profane in their designs.

The Sun Bearer god made a child with a poor woman. That child was named Great Gambler because his father groomed him to win turquoise and beads from the wealthy Anaasází living nearby. Great Gambler grew tall and handsome and became unbeatable in the eight games of chance. He lured the Anaasází into gambles with two turquoise earrings the size of silver dollars. He first won their crops, then their possessions, and then the people themselves as slaves. He even won the chief and his wife.

But Great Gambler refused to give even a small piece of his fortune to his father, Sun Bearer. The god was enraged, and he went to the Mirage People and raised a second son, identical to the first. The new son was named Great Gambler's Twin. Sun Bearer trained the twin in the ways of the games and charged him to defeat the Great Gambler. The other gods smiled, as did the land and the animals for they were not pleased, either, with Great Gambler's greed.

The holy people, the animals and the Holy Wind itself helped the twin against his brother, and the twin defeated Great Gambler in all of the first seven games. On the last game—the running race—the twin shot Great Gambler with an arrow in the leg, then shot him halfway up the body, then between the shoulders, then behind the head.

Great Gambler fell and lost the race. He cried, "I lose all, even my life. But I will kill you all with lightning. I will send war and disease among you. May the cold freeze you! May the fire burn you! May the waters drown you!"

The Twin picked up Great Gambler and slipped him on his bowstring and shot him into the sky. Great Gambler muttered and swore all the way to the moon.

As befell the Anaasází shall also befall the *Diné*. As they forget the Navajo language, the ceremonies, and as they bet against the Great Gambler, so shall the People end.

THE NIGHT before meeting the Navajo, the convoy of partisans slept in a parking lot in a small Navajo town. They set out before first light for the governmental seat of the Navajo Nation at Window Rock, Arizona.

When they arrived, the ground beneath Dutch hunched. He'd never seen anyplace like Window Rock, and he marveled that it existed in America. Great stones the size of aircraft carriers rose out of the ground, and circled themselves with garlands of winter-bare cottonwood. Over eons, the wind had caressed the rock monuments into curling chutes and plunging raceways. The place exhaled a long, sacred breath in the still of the chill morning.

They arrived just as the sun touched the ancestral home of the Navajo. It dressed the faces of the monoliths in orange cheeks and yellow brows. They fairly glowed over the Navajo buildings placed with reverence between the mounts.

Dutch had expected a few, government buildings surrounded by a miles of ramshackle trailer parks and maybe a cheap hotel. What he beheld was Mother Nature's whimsy acknowledged by a few, awestruck creations of man. The Navajo, from what he'd seen on the road and in this place, preferred to live lightly. They clustered into few towns, and preferred to spread themselves across the land in greening pockets of moisture and against ancient stone windbreaks. It was Dutch's first indication that he'd wandered into a storyline he couldn't predict.

The second indication was the thousand men conducting parade drills in the parking lot as he entered town. Dozens of drill sergeants stood before ranks of men, shouting orders and slapping young men into shape. The native soldiers wore a mishmash of clothing and carried a wide array of rifles, but they were clearly preparing for war.

Most of the partisan convoy broke off and stopped in the parking lot to observe the shaping of the native army. Two Humvees, with Daltrey, Dutch, Teddy and Mika Whiterock continued two blocks to the Navajo Office of their President.

Standing silently under a tree by the road, as though they'd been there for days, stood a man in a suit, a very old man who looked like the lead singer of the Grateful Dead, and Joe Whiterock.

Dutch turned to ask Mika if she'd known her grandfather would be there, only to realize she was in the other Humvee. Dutch felt like he'd stepped off a train only to find the platform was ten feet below. The strange town, the sandstone monoliths, the drilling troops and these three men, patient as statues, shook him with the realization that he didn't know what the hell was going on. He'd come to Window Rock to horse trade for mules only to find the natives trotting out the palominos.

The brakes squealed as the Humvee stopped in front of the greeting party. Dutch winced, ran his hand over his hair, and climbed down from the passenger seat. He locked eyes with Joe Whiterock, flashed his confusion, and got nothing but a ghost of a smile in return.

He was meant to be unsettled, Dutch understood, but the ambush lacked the leather-sharpened edge of malice. These men meant well.

And the native soldiers? Wasn't that the carrot he was supposed to chase? Why were the troops already assembled?

"Hello, I'm President James Dandy and this is our medicine man for Window Rock, Hastiin Mitchell. And I believe you already know Joe Whiterock from the Paiutes." The Navajo president shook Dutch's hand. The

medicine man shook hands weakly, letting his fingers fold in Dutch's firm grip.

The medicine man wore Wranglers and an ancient but clean black shirt. His copious black and gray hair was tied up in a topknot and held back from his face with a red bandana. He wore a jumbled necklace, woven through with beads and small tokens. His face was withered into walnut crags. It was the face of a man who knew exactly what he was doing. A shock of terror shot down Dutch's spine when he regarded the silent man's eyes. He couldn't remember ever feeling so out-of-his-league.

Dutch tried to recover. "Your troops look good."

"They're *your* troops," President Dandy corrected. "The men you saw in the parking lot are just the Apache. The Navajo and the rest of the warriors from around the West and the Midwest are training at Fort Defiance up the road. You have over ten thousand men here, Mr. President."

The old medicine man, Hastiin, mumbled a long refrain in the Navajo language while the other men waited. President Dandy translated. "He says, like a grasshopper comes out of the ground in the spring, and bounces here and there, we have awoken to war. But we have forgotten the way. You must teach war again to our young men."

Dutch nodded and introduced Daltrey. "We've come with special forces soldiers—adept at training fighters." He held his hand out to the operator standing beside him. Daltrey shook hands.

"This is my granddaughter, Mika," Joe offered to the Navajo leaders. She shook their hands as well. The medicine man hesitated.

"We sacrificed our solar panels, here, to run power at the soldier's barracks, so it's a bit warm in our offices. Perhaps we can talk under the trees?"

Daltrey returned to the Humvees. Mika stutter-stepped, then retreated with him. She looked as destabilized as Dutch felt.

The Navajo president showed the four men to a rickety picnic table under

a large, bare-branched tree. The medicine man sat close to Dutch, despite there being enough bench for them to spread out.

“I’ll be frank.” Dutch began. “What’s the catch?”

The medicine man responded in English. “In the wheel-turn of time, you always come here. The twin of the Great Gambler comes to defeat his brother, and the Navajo are preserved from death. You have come to free us from slavery, and to stop the fire over the land. We are the People of the Land and we are charged with protecting it. You come to help us, not the other way around.” He patted Dutch’s leg and smiled.

Dutch looked to Dandy, then to Joe Whiterock. They both nodded their heads in agreement, as though what the old man said made perfect sense.

The Navajo president seemed to notice Dutch’s consternation. He chuckled, reached across the chipped paint of the picnic bench and laid his hand over Dutch’s hand.

“It is good. We share common cause. You were always going to come here. Our story tells us that you would, and we are grateful. But let’s get breakfast. Soon the mothers will bid their sons farewell. If we may, perhaps, we should bless them—and bless you and your teacher-soldiers. There is time.”

Dutch nodded agreement, but he worried that maybe there wasn’t time. The Russians could crack the code any moment. He glanced overhead at the strengthening winter sun, but no contrails of white bisected the clear, blue sky.

The medicine man followed Dutch’s look to the sky, understood, and nodded. “There is time,” the medicine man confirmed. “For the Enemy Way ceremony and the Blessingway ceremony. The skin walkers who speak to metal cannot find the chirp of the wren in their green boxes. They will make the journey south to the great cave-in-the-mountain to catch the wren, and there the eight games of the Gambler will play out over the corpse of the Mirage People.”

Dutch shot a glance at Joe Whiterock who shrugged, wide-eyed, as if to say, *Don't look at me. I'm not Navajo. I don't know what the hell he's talking about either.*

President Dandy chuckled at the unspoken exchange. "Gentlemen. Breakfast." He stood. The warped picnic bench shifted perilously. Dutch reached for the medicine man's elbow, steadied him and helped him to stand, for which the old man gave him an appreciative nod.

The four men ambled down the dusty road. The hoots and shouts of native recruits at drill rolled down the canyons, with the tittering of birds and the rustling of tree limbs.

TEDDY CAUGHT Mika's arm as she flitted from one Humvee to the other.

"What's the panic?" he steered her face toward his. Her expression down-shifted from alarm, to confusion, to surrender. Her legs quieted.

"It's the Navajo," she explained. "They're regressing, I think."

Teddy didn't know what she meant, but the worry lines on her face had aged her half a decade.

Her hands gesticulated up and down her body. "I'm wearing pants and carrying a gun. The medicine man gave me a hard look. You don't understand: they blame me for the apocalypse."

"You?" Teddy exclaimed.

"Well, not me specifically, but women. Feminists. There's a Navajo prophecy that women will abandon their hogans and their families to take unholy leadership of the Diné—that feminism will be a big part of what causes the apocalypse. I could see it in the medicine man's eyes: they decided that the prophecies have come true. The feminists were wrong. They think we went crazy and caused the end of the world. Women are to blame. Here I am, unmarried and wearing pants, educated at the white man's school and

fighting alongside men. I'm a pariah here. A curse. Do you think I should change out of these pants?" Her hands flicked here-and-there as she talked, like a finch dancing on a wind-tossed limb. Her confidence had evaporated in a storm of self-doubt, and it made Teddy love her double. He did his best to contain the emotion and draw himself down to her plight.

"Help me understand," he asked. "How is feminism bad?"

"It's a colonial idea to the Navajo. Heck, I don't know. Maybe it's a colonial idea to all natives."

"Colonial?" Teddy thought he was beginning to see.

"Yes. Feminism is modern, white European. Your people brought the seeds of the idea to my people and your schools perpetuated it. The Navajo would say that I've been seduced into your way—the Anglo way."

"Have you been?" he asked. Teddy had often thought that progressivism was like a snake that ate its own tail—ideas that turned on themselves. But his unrequited love for Mika shook apart his clutching at arguments. He could barely remember his old opinions. He let go and listened.

"Maybe," she deflated. "I don't know. Honestly, we were still trying to figure that out. The matriarchy of the tribes had power before colonialization by the whites. Our great-great grandmothers owned all the livestock. We didn't need to sit on the counsels to have an equal vote with men. Women vetoed bad decisions by the men because they controlled the sheep. Then the U.S. government ordered the sheep, the cattle and goats slaughtered. They scrambled our system. After that, rape on the reservations tracked sky-high with alcoholism. So, maybe feminism is a colonial idea. Fuck. I'm not sure." Mika had gone back to shifting from one foot to the other.

Teddy had to be careful. He wanted nothing more in this world than to lay in front of a warm hearth and make babies with this woman. He *wanted* the Navajo to be right. He would give anything for her to give up running the world and join him in making a family. But, of course, she had no idea that's what he wanted.

“Maybe just while you’re here, you can adapt for them,” he suggested. “Later, you can think it all through and decide.”

Her head darted around, as though looking for a place to change out of her pants.

“Breathe,” Teddy urged with a smile. “It’s okay.”

“Thank you.” Her frown cracked into a slight smile. “I know it’s not life or death.” She barked a laugh. “I think I’ll borrow a skirt, and maybe ask someone to braid my hair.”

In any other circumstance, it might’ve been a defeat, but her face loosened by degrees as she talked. Teddy didn’t understand the discombobulation, but since the first moment of their arrival in Window Rock, puckish winds blew through their convoy. An otherworldly aura hung over this place. As Teddy watched Mika trudge toward a knot of women bustling under a shade awning, he felt the wheel of his own fate turning. He’d never felt so right—in the right place at the right time, with no idea whatsoever what to do next.

If only his father would save them from nuclear oblivion, that would be awesome.

JOE WHITEROCK WOULD’VE NORMALLY PLAYED the diplomat, and help bridge the gap between one nation and the other. But for the moment, he kept his trap shut.

“The Metal People will come back by way of the uranium rock and destroy the earth,” the medicine man said around mouthfuls of dark, orange eggs. “Dark Walking Metal, Blue Walking Metal, Yellow Metal and Crystal. They’re coming down through the clouds. Fire will consume the land.” He took another bite. “Good eggs, no? Home grown.”

Joe Whiterock shot a glance at President McAdams, and the man’s eyes

were wide with befuddlement. Joe prayed McAdams would keep his mouth shut too. He hoped the medicine man would go back to speaking in Navajo. President Dandy ate his breakfast as though nothing was amiss.

McAdams went to speak and Joe cut him off. “Mr. President, President Dandy—if I may explain?” Joe took a breath and ordered his thoughts. “The Navajo see the world in cycles—as though natural history is a repeating pattern. Like a human life proceeds from infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood to old age, so does the life of the land, but it renews at each turn. It repeats the same pattern. Time is not a line, like it appears. Rather, it’s a circle.” Joe drew a circle on the table with the dew from his water glass. “To be anywhere in that circle is no cause for alarm. When Mr. Hastiin said that uranium will destroy the earth, he means that it always destroys the earth. The metal walking people always come. It could be tomorrow, or it could be millennia from now. It’s all the same to him.”

Joe couldn’t tell if the medicine man was grinning like a pleased teacher because he felt understood, or because the eggs were so delicious.

McAdams settled back in his chair and picked up his fork. “What happens next?” he asked the table.

The Navajo president replied, “The medicine men request an Emergence Way Chant, a War Rite Enemy Way and a Blessingway ceremony.”

“How long do you plan on hosting us?” McAdams looked from the Navajo president to the medicine man. He wanted to know how long his presence was required here—how long until they could get back on the road with their new army?

“Maybe some number of days.” The Navajo president’s answer sounded like a rebuke, but Joe knew it wasn’t. The Navajo didn’t know how long it would take. Joe had participated in Navajo ceremonies three other times, and nobody really knew how long they would last. Things took the time they took, and McAdams could leave the reservation any time he liked. The Navajo wouldn’t much mind. The ceremonies would happen either way.

The Navajo medicine men had foreseen this conflict for hundreds of years. There had been almost total agreement among their spiritualists—the gods rallied the Navajo to a holy war against the “skinwalkers;” practitioners of dark witchcraft. In a characterization that sent a chill down Joe Whiterock’s spine, the medicine man, Hastiin, had said to him, “The next war is fought with the metal that thinks for itself. The skinwalkers from the Mirage People come from the sky, and now walk our land. A white medicine woman speaks to the metal that speaks to itself, and she leads us to war. The Diné will go to war.”

The Navajo were their own brand of native. Joe rarely understood what they meant when they waxed spiritual. Except for this time.

A white medicine woman speaks to the metal that speaks to itself.

The Navajo often thought of savants like Bethany as medicine men or women. Joe had not mentioned her or her AI to a single Navajo.

When the Navajo invited the American president to come to Window Rock, it hadn’t been with hope or menace. The Navajo had known he would come. It was fated.

There would be a ton of weirdness in the ceremony days to come. This “highest” medicine man—Hastiin—was a hand trembler. He received prophecy and saw truth through the shaking of his palsied hand. It was a spiritual gift among medicine men, though Joe would’ve preferred a star gazer, crystal gazer or wind listener to a hand trembler, because those spiritual gifts would seem a lot less bizarre to McAdams.

Joe hoped to avoid explaining the hand trembling to McAdams. One of Hastiin’s go-to stories was about how a Gila Monster lizard had given him the gift of seeing, healing and trembling, sitting on the privy, as a boy. Hopefully, the holy man would gloss over that gem and move straight into the ceremonies.

As McAdams quietly ate his breakfast, Joe sensed something different in the man. Dutch had been bloodied in battle. A weight had descended upon

him. His shoulders sagged and the smile lines at the corners of his eyes had surrendered to gravity. The worry lines on his forehead were etched like a clay field. The president was a man beset with sorrow, and perhaps that was best.

If Dutch McAdams was the Twin of the Great Gambler, as the Navajo believed he was, then something would have to give. Perhaps the process had begun.

Joe needed him to stay. He needed Dutch McAdams to bow to the Navajo.

But that was only on the surface of what was happening. That was only the clinking of gears and the whining of springs. The real power in this place vibrated at a deeper level, below the sand and rock.

As terrifying as Sagehen's predictions, and as cryptic as the Navajo prophecies, Joe feared that their sins might yet be too great. After all the money he'd made and the glory he'd reaped from the white man's world, a greater god demanded a clean slate. Joe's ancient heart feared for his unborn grandchildren.

He watched the American president eat his eggs, lately the most powerful man in the world. If he was the twin of the Great Gambler, he was also a very sad man. Despondent, even. Dutch McAdams had fallen far since the last time Joe had seen him.

His hopes for Mika, and the generations nested within her, hinged on this one, broken-hearted white man. Would he find the courage for what came next?

MIKA WORRIED she was selling out.

The Diné women remembered her from the pageant days and graciously lent her a dress and braided her hair. They occasionally slipped into the

Navajo language as they clustered around her, tittering and laughing—an island of sisterhood in a world ringed by war.

Women appeared and disappeared, only to return with a silver dollar belt, a turquoise necklace, a traditional broach. When they were done fawning over her, they'd gone so far with the dress-up, she felt like she might be appropriating Navajo culture.

Mika was Paiute, not Navajo. She would've been crawling out of her skin dressed like this in Los Angeles. Mika wondered, *had she been colonialized?* There were too many turns in the stream. She could no longer navigate. She couldn't track the path of what was right or what was wrong.

The women who surrounded her were not confused. The Navajo women fought a singular, clear-minded struggle, and it hadn't wavered in ten thousand years. Day in and day out, they sweated and fretted to achieve just one thing: that their children and homes would survive and flourish. Safety. Sustenance. Shelter. "Native American Studies" would mean little to them. It might even sound absurd.

One by one, the Navajo women drifted back to their labors in the community kitchen, and with a final stroke of Mika's hair, the last one left her alone. She sat in a corner of the shade, dressed in wool and velveteen, turquoise and silver. Mika came loose from her moorings and drifted free.

She wept for the death of her old life. She wept for the loss of her career and her accomplishments. They were laid to rest alongside the modern world and replaced by what she always thought she wanted: the ancient ways. But it felt like a loss to her. It felt like a death.

Her grief hesitated, though. Her tears dried on her cheek. Something new, and profoundly old, was being born inside the husk of what had been shattered. It was redolent of fresh earth and wet, fallen leaves. It sprouted from a sodden seed of truth. Mika couldn't describe that truth, but it smelled like new life. In the midst of a stale winter, spring visited her.

She stood up, wiped her face and admired the Navajo dress and the beads

in her braids. She gathered her camouflage fatigues in her arms and left to find her grandfather.

THE BLESSINGS LASTED MANY DAYS, and Dutch discovered that he did not care.

Most of the ceremonies took place in a large hogan, peaked on the inside with a small, wood burning stove in the center and a stovepipe through the roof. The outside of the hogan was thick, packed clay. Layers of heavy juniper logs soared to a confluence of intersecting forks. The construction gave the impression of gnarled randomness, coming together in perfect strength.

The medicine man, Hastiin, sat on one side. Dutch couldn't remember which point of the compass it was. *South? West? Southwest?*

He'd been adrift for countless hours. He wandered in and out of the ceremonial hogan for sleep, bathroom, and food. Within the shelter, an endless succession of painting sand, waving prayer sticks, manipulating small fetishes and chanting occupied the days and nights in the otherworldly desert of the Navajo.

Daltrey, Dutch, Teddy, Mika and Joe came and went from the ceremonies like honored interlopers. The Navajo didn't seem concerned with their attendance one way or the other, but Dutch found himself drawn to the smoldering sage and rhythmic chants. For one, three hour duration of singing, dancing, and working trinkets, the medicine man prayed over Dutch. He caressed Dutch with stones, feathers and twisted sticks. His skin, clothes and hair were bathed in incense. Dutch found himself swaying to the old man's practiced voice and ancient, trembling hands.

Women seemed as welcome as men in the hogan. A young girl from the community played a central role in the interminable ceremonies. Joe

Whiterock explained that she was in menarche—experiencing her first period. Her coming fertility was treated as powerful magic, and the girl passed through an intricate coming-of-age series of chants, actions and even a long run as dawn broke.

None of it made any sense to Dutch. Just when he thought he understood the supernatural schema, the few actions he understood turned in a wholly new direction. He was frustratingly, then blissfully, lost.

Time bent to strange shapes. The haze of the juniper wood fire in the stove became his universe. The Russians, and his role as president, drifted up to the peak of the hogan, wormed through the gaps in the wood and soaked into the flaming stars in the black firmament.

At some turn in the ceremony, after Dutch lost track of the days, the men were ushered out through the piñon forests as the light of day faltered and the star field resumed its dominion. They came to a knob jutting above the clay desert, like a whale's back rising out of the sea. Beside it, a Navajo man tended a glowing fire.

Hastiin showed the way through a sunken doorway and eight men passed into a manmade cave. They stepped clockwise around the small, stone-lined pit in the center. It held several nearly-molten rocks. Hastiin followed the men in, carrying an old coffee pot from the fire. He swirled it, then splashed water on the rocks. A trunk of hissing steam shot to the ceiling, pungent with the aroma of sage.

Again, the medicine man sang. He flicked the sage-scented water on each man from a gnarled branch.

Time stood still for Dutch. It seemed he'd been in a Navajo ceremony all his days, drifting in and out of himself. He soaked in the melodious jabber. His thoughts meandered from the old world, to this world, and into the endless desert. He came adrift onto seas of sand and juniper.

Some corner of him fought to obtain what he needed from this—from the Navajo—but the sweltering, ceaseless chanting kept swiping his soul free of

the impulse to *take*. A hundred times, his discomfort and irritation rose in mighty, irrepressible waves. Dutch boiled with a desire to stand up, roar his frustration, bellow fury at the plodding Navajo and their gods. But each time, he found a new pocket of grace—an undiscovered reserve of patience. In those moments, his angst dissipated into the hot steam. In small surges and drifts, the stillness accumulated in him, carried on the chants, nudged forward by the sweet smell of sage and the kind melody of the wordless voice of Hastiin.

For the first time in his life, Dutch gave up. He surrendered himself to the juniper beams where they met at the peak of the lodge. He drifted into the sky. He agitated no more.

After a time, the heat in the sweat lodge swelled, and Dutch felt like he might pass out. He awoke back into his body. He stood and picked his way clockwise around the other men, toward the rough wood lintel, and into the freezing night. The chanting continued for a time, then the medicine man, alone, followed Dutch out from the womb of steam. The two men stood together, half naked. They regarded the painful splendor of the stars overhead. The winter chill would require a moment before it penetrated the bone-deep heat that the men carried from the sweat lodge.

The one thought that'd ridden Dutch's heart like a horse thief came to him unbidden, and he spoke it to the night. "I violated duty to my country in order to save my son." He croaked the words toward the Milky Way, burning a trail across the sky. The medicine man grunted in acknowledgement.

Hastiin spoke very slowly. "Can a bad father to a son be a good father to a country?" He chuckled at his own joke.

"I swore an oath to defend America and the Constitution," Dutch replied.

Hastiin grunted. "A man swears many oaths. The gods find it amusing to pit them against each other. But a paper with important words is just a paper. A boy is a boy. He is full of flesh. His heart beats in his chest. His bones teem with the future. A boy is holy. When you made the boy, and you raised him;

you were a god. Everything since has been half as sacred."

The horse thief in Dutch's chest fell from the horse and broke his neck. A loosening began at his neck, poured down his back, across his shoulders and trickled to his sandaled feet. Dutch hadn't made the slightest sound, but the medicine man sighed in relief, as though they shared a corner of Dutch's soul.

"I'm cold," the medicine man said. He turned and passed back through the doorframe and back into the blessed heat.

14

Main Street, Mike's Saloon and Liquor
Albin, Wyoming

Vitaly stood in formation with 600 Spetsnaz paratroopers, while the colonel briefed them on the mission. One of the benefits of being in a Spetsnaz units: the soldiers were expected to make their own tactical decisions in the heat of battle, so command shared the overall, strategic objectives in greater detail. In the regular army, they told you which direction to march and nothing else.

"We move out to Colorado Springs day after tomorrow. It's 350 kilometers. We'll pass through Cheyenne and go around the ruins of Denver. We've requested satellite overflight of the cities. We know that Denver is a ghost town, but Colorado Springs has a militarized remnant of the American Fourth Infantry Division. We estimate seven thousand men, now just a mafia enslaving the people. They operate out of Stryker armored vehicles and on foot. We have no reason to believe they will offer organized resistance, but you will prepare as if they shall. We must pass around the city of Colorado Springs to reach our objective."

Vitaly guessed their objective would be NORAD. It was buried beneath the crags of the Rocky Mountains, immediately to the west of Colorado

Springs. Breaking into the underground fortress would be a challenge, but even the hardiest defenses could be penetrated given enough time. The Cheyenne Mountain facility had been designed to defeat the violence of nuclear bombs, not the clawing of heavy machinery. Still, sneaking past 7,000 troops and assaulting a mountain fortress sounded like a really bad idea. It had the fingerprints of Moscow.

“We’ve ordered air assets from home in case resistance organizes, but we haven’t the time to wait. Most of you will travel in buses that we’ve requisitioned from the locals,” the colonel explained. There were ten school buses parked alongside the two lane highway. “The column will be protected by BMDs and drones. It should be a pleasant journey,” the colonel smiled and the men chuckled.

Vitaly had learned in Chechnya: when an officer appeared utterly confident, that was the time to fear.

WHEN THEY EMERGED from the Navajo ceremonies, six days had passed. Dutch McAdams greeted the fresh winter morning with a lighter heart. The desert swelled with the scent of creosote and sage, and crystal dew frosted the leaves of the cottonwoods. Window Rock awaited, clean, blessed and ready for the coming war.

A sea of black-haired mothers saw their young men off beside the greatly-expanded convoy. They embraced them as they boarded trucks, vans and busses for the journey north. An army of medicine men waved fronds over the vehicles. The shouting Green Berets marshaled the Native American boys onto transport.

The night before, in a war counsel, Dutch and the Special Forces detachment decided they would first clear the city of Pueblo. The indigenous irregulars would cut their teeth against gangs before facing Russian Spetsnaz.

The convoy of ten thousand new troops would be in position to enter Pueblo by nightfall.

The natives didn't assert themselves into the command structure. They followed the lead of the Special Forces, trusting them. Dutch didn't understand it—couldn't fathom how these people would offer up their young men after all the bad blood between natives and the old government, but that was exactly what they did.

After six days in hogans and sweat lodges, Dutch surrendered to the truth that he knew nothing about their culture. They burrowed under America all this time, their wisdom and patient hands largely forgotten. The Native Americans were mighty in a way Dutch couldn't grasp. They'd been like a honeycombed beehive under the floorboards; redolent of honey and softly buzzing, unknown to the starving family above. After his time in the hogan, Dutch could smell that fragrance. He had no clue how they made the honey, but he felt wonder at their gift. He'd begun to see the fall of America as perhaps more than a nuclear blast, or a perilous shift in the markets. Dutch felt the paucity of his old ways and he sorrowed.

They pulled out of Window Rock as the sun pierced the lip of the mountains to the east. Women wept and old men waved. Dutch worried about how many of the native boys and girls would return. Then he remembered Major General Harmer, his steel behemoths and his thousands of men. The natives boys were the backup plan, and if things went well, they wouldn't see serious combat.

The convoy stretched along the back highways of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado like a glinting, growling serpent—wending its way through quiet towns en route to holy war. Dutch's unit of Sho-Pai and Idaho National Guardsmen led, and the Native American young people followed. The Tenth Group Special Forces were embedded with the "indig"—indigenous soldiers—and they crammed training into every moment of their time together. Each stop on the road was a chance to muster, every free

moment in the vehicles saw them disassembling weapons, practicing communications and discussing IADs, reaction to ambush, bounding and firearm safety. The dry, chill air of the Southwest, spilled through cracked windows, and carried the thrum of urgency and the thrill of coming conflict.

Dutch's joints had loosened. The morning sun rose just as it always did, but the color of the light flourished. The Navajo—in their gibbering dance with earth—had removed a malignancy from his belly. He could no longer locate the kink in his soul that'd cramped him since the fall of Air Force One. His breath now came in rolling, bottom-of-his-lung waves, like surf combing the sand.

Dutch longed to see Sharon and hear her voice. She would know what it meant—why a sudden calm had overtaken him. As he slid north, toward collision with the Russians, he smelled more deeply, heard the tiny sounds more fully and felt the souls bustling around him more warmly. Dutch felt human again.

Joe Whiterock accompanied him in the command Humvee, but they said little. The brotherhood and goodwill between them was palpable beneath the grumble of the noisy engine.

As evening descended, the convoy pulled into the pre-designated rally point at the reservoir outside of Pueblo. There, Joe Whiterock interrupted the spell. "Tell me, Dutch."

Dutch almost asked, *Tell you what?* but that would've been obtuse. They both knew what Joe meant.

"It might take me a few days to find my feet again."

"Or," Joe smiled, "Maybe you never will. Maybe you saw the world through the doorway of the sweat lodge. That's fortunate, given that the world is gone. The tension…" Old Joe Whiterock held his two hands together like a ten stalks of wheat, then he blew into his fingers and they billowed apart, like chaff floating in the cab of the Humvee. "The old tension wasn't real anyway. It never belonged."

“Tension?” Dutch asked.

Joe made another motion with his hands like he was wringing out his heart. “The anxiety. We made it hard for ourselves to breathe.”

Dutch chuckled.

When was the last time he’d smelled his wife? When had he stopped the static in his head long enough to enjoy her aroma?

It’d probably been ten years, maybe longer.

Had that life just happened to him, or had he made it happen?

Every finish line had been followed by another finish line. Every victory had been overwhelmed by the shadow of the next goal. Every win had been subsumed into the bigger win.

The earth had been waiting for Dutch’s return; waiting for him to come back to the hiking trail. As a young man, he guided hikers along the trails of the eastern slope of the California High Sierras. Back then, his world revolved around granite footpaths, tangy pine, chilly mornings and the high-spirited clients. It’d probably been the last time he’d known the mother soil and her green, living foundlings. After that, his life became sharp corners and angled edges. The iron rails of man shunted him away from the mountains and drew him into the machine. The cast metal cogs dragged him deeper: winning elections, debating issues, strategizing alliances, defeating adversaries.

A boy is holy, the ancient man had said, shirtless under the vast universe.

Dutch’s son was in another Humvee and Dutch missed him. Teddy and his sister were the most honest thing Dutch had done with his life. Compared to the boy and girl, the presidency had been a passing squall.

Fox News had heralded him as the “Ultimate Dad,” and Dutch had taken pride in that. He never missed a ball game, they said in print. He wasn’t sure if it was true, but Teddy blanched whenever it was said, and Dutch hadn’t known why.

Dutch played the game of being the “Greatest Dad,” because it’d been a

chance to heap guilt upon his own father. When Fox News raved about Dutch, one thought arose in his mind: *he hoped his father was watching.*

HIS JUNIOR YEAR of high school, his friends started calling him "Dutch."

Ronald Reagan, the governor or California, had once come to dinner at his parents' ranch. At the time, Dutch had been a square-jawed quarterback for the Bishop, California Union High School *Broncos,* and since sixth grade, he'd run for class office every year. His friends joked that he was like Ronald Reagan Junior. Reagan's nickname was Dutch, so they called Nathaniel "Dutch Junior," which eventually became just "Dutch."

Dutch hardly went anywhere without his letterman's jacket—winter or summer. He'd been elected junior class Vice President, and his dad had him reading *The Fountainhead*, probably to lull him deeper toward the Conservative Right. Dutch dated a few cheerleaders and pulled straight A's. In his mind, he was a living, breathing Howard Roark—the anti-hero of Ayn Rand novels. For a month or two, Dutch even dreamed about becoming an architect.

His dad was the chairman of the Inyo County Republican Party, and it was a good time to be a Republican. Ronald Reagan had just announced his candidacy for President of the United States, and Inyo County, on the backside of the High Sierras, was home to some of Reagan's most die-hard supporters.

One of his dad's friends, Albert Van Morrison, also from "the party," asked Benjamin McAdams for help with his son. The man owned a successful furniture company and his boy had been raised with more money than the McAdams. The kid's privilege spilled over into a nasty habit with a new street drug called *cocaine*.

Dutch knew the kid from football. They went to schools on opposite ends

of the county, but Dutch had played against the guy—a half-decent wide receiver. When Dutch's dad suggested he become friends with his friend's son—"Van" they called him—Dutch naturally agreed. He was unaware of the expectation that he was supposed to save the kid.

Dutch and Van met at a malt shop in Bishop and bounced around one Saturday night to the "hot spots" in Dutch's hometown: the Carter Bowl, the parking lot of Bob's Big Boy, and the empty lot across from Bishop's one-room movie theater.

Van was into punk rock—a first for Dutch. He'd never heard of the up-and-coming British punk music scene. Back then, Dutch and his buddies mostly listened to Led Zepplin and Rush. In the front seat of Dutch's Volkswagen bug, the rich kid popped one tape after another into the tape deck and gave Dutch a tour de force of seventies punk: The Talking Heads, David Bowie, Blondie and The Sex Pistols.

Dutch liked the music, but he liked Van Morrison even more. Van had a style entirely his own. His hair stuck up in a five-inch mohawk, and he'd pierced his ear. He wore a black, studded leather jacket and laughed easily. The guy was hilarious, and Dutch's football buddies—despite the crazy hair—befriended Van instantly.

After a few weeks of hanging out, Van came up with the ultimate kick-in-the-pants idea: why not dress Dutch up as a punk rocker, do his hair spiked-up in purple, and take him to a Lone Pine High dance? Nobody would recognize the Bishop High quarterback—and Dutch could hit on the girls like the newest punk rocker in town, straight across the pond from England. Dutch went to work on his British accent.

"*Bloody hell!*" Dutch started swearing in British.

Dutch came home a few days before the dance to an ambush. His mother and father waited in the family room after football practice. It was weird because Dutch's dad worked every day, twenty-four-seven in his real estate development business. He was never home during the day.

“Come in, Nathan,” his dad called out. “Sit down.” His dad stood over the chair where Dutch was supposed to sit. “Mr. Van Morrison called me at work this morning and told me about your plan to dress up like a hoodlum and go to a Lone Pine dance with Van.”

“Yeah. It’ll be cool.” Dutch couldn’t imagine why his parents would care.

His father shook his head and sighed. “Your mother and I are disappointed in you.”

“What? Why?” Dutch shot up from the chair.

“We thought you’d be a good influence on Todd Van Morrison, not the other way around.”

“What? You think I’m going to start doing drugs or something? How do you expect me to be a ‘good influence’ if I’m not his friend? Friends do stuff together.”

His dad held up his hand to stop him. “It’s over. You’re not hanging out with Todd Van Morrison anymore.”

“Why? Dad, no. You’re blowing this out of proportion.”

His dad shook his head while Dutch argued. “My son isn’t going to gallivant around Inyo County dressed like a drug addict. No. You’re done with Todd Van Morrison.”

“This was never about being his friend, was it?” Dutch shouted. “This was *always* about you being some kinda amazing parent in the eyes of Mr. Van Morrison.” He slammed his hands on his hips. It was the first time Dutch had said anything disrespectful to his father.

“Nathan,” his mom interrupted. “Calm down. This isn’t about your father’s reputation. We just want to protect you from bad things.”

Dutch almost shouted *bullshit!* but he pulled himself back at the last second. If he said that to his mom, his dad might’ve hit him. His dad had never hit him before, but Dutch had never shouted at his parents before either.

Maybe being punched in the face wouldn’t be so bad. At least then his

dad would have to get messy with him; he'd have to be a part of the family instead of hovering over it like some kind of holy ancestor.

His father overshadowed him, and Dutch slumped down on the couch. His father held up an imperious finger. "You're grounded for two weeks. Todd will be going away for a while— since now it's clear you weren't strong enough to be a positive influence."

The blood rushed to Dutch's face and he bit his tongue. His parents were dead wrong. They were full of shit. His father was more concerned with his good standing in the community than his son helping another kid. He could see it on his face, plain as pasta.

"The next time you want to look good in front of your political friends," Dutch hissed, "use Laurel. I'm not going to be the poster boy for McAdams family breeding anymore." Dutch stormed out of the living room.

They didn't follow, and they never discussed Todd Van Morrison again.

On the surface, not much changed. Dutch was grounded for a few days, Van vanished, and they all moved on.

Some kids rebelled against their parents and other kids stayed on the program. Dutch knew in his gut that his parents were lying to themselves about the Van Morrison thing, but he wasn't going to blow up his life to prove his point. He continued to be a model student, a half-decent football player and the golden boy of Inyo County.

It stung that his father hadn't trusted him with Todd Van Morrison. Dutch knew exactly what he was doing. He'd always been good at making friends. In this way, he was smarter than his dad. His old man had good looks. He was a tall, silver-haired statue of a man, but he wasn't the kind of person people naturally liked. His dad was useful to friends, but he wasn't fun.

Dutch, on the other hand, was popular, and not just because his parents were influential and owned a ranch. Dutch knew how to make people feel included. He knew how to make them laugh and forget their worries. He could've easily won Junior Class President, but he hadn't wanted to make

Rodney Carvill feel bad by beating him. Rodney was one of Dutch's receivers on the football team, and a good guy. Rod wanted to be class president, so Dutch took Vice Prez instead that year.

Dutch's dad was a political facilitator, but Dutch was a true leader. With Van, his father set up the friendship, and then stuck his fingers in the mix; as though he knew the first thing about helping a kid like Van. His parents botched it by thinking they knew better. They were capable of being stupid, just like everyone else.

The realization came all-at-once after the Van debacle: his mom and dad weren't infallible geniuses. They were as apt to fall for their foolishness as anyone. Dutch had trusted them with his life decisions, and it dawned on him that they were closed-minded and self-absorbed, like everyone else.

How much of what they'd taught him was crap? What about church? What about God? What about college? Could he believe anything they'd taught him? The doubt made him feel very alone. He felt, for the first time, like he was facing the world as a team of one.

The instant before he walked into the living room ambush, he'd been part of a clan; a happy wolf in the center of a well-respected pack. He stormed out of the room, ten minutes later, a loner. He still loved his parents, but in his mind, they went from being alpha wolves atop the granite crags, to just another couple dogs mucking around in the rabbit brush, doing the best they knew how. Dutch would never follow their advice again without some reservation.

If only his old man had taken the time to really know Dutch—instead of popping in when he wanted to make elaborate course corrections—he would've known to trust him with Todd Van Morrison. He would've seen his son's talent and character.

At every turn in his political career, as the voters validated Dutch's goodness and strength at the ballot box, Dutch secretly thrilled that his father, sitting in his La-Z-Boy chair in Inyo County, would witness the election

results.

See, Dad! he wanted to shout, even as they elected him President of the United States, *I can be trusted!*

As Dutch built his own family with Sharon, he swore the same would not happen with his son and daughter. He promised himself that he'd be up-to-his-neck in their lives, senator or not. President or not. He'd be the dad who knew his kids' brilliance and celebrated them.

If Fox News called it being the "Ultimate Dad," so be it.

"ON ME!" Teddy McAdams shouted over the crackle of gunfire. He waved his fire team on a sprint across the street and into the cemetery. He would've liked for one of the Sho-Pai boys to take point, but they still didn't have the tactics on lock. The guys on his team were learning, but when they got out front, they put themselves in harm's way too often. In the clutch, Teddy led.

The gravestones and widely-spaced pines offered the perfect field for flanking. So far, the gangbangers of Pueblo hadn't turned up with machine guns. As long as Teddy flanked wide enough—more a question of physical endurance than anything—he could get around to the blind side and tear them up. It was the third time that morning in Pueblo that he'd pulled this same move.

Mika commanded the other two-thirds of the squad as a base of fire while Teddy and his two guys looped around to put the gangbangers in a crossfire. The move relied on impeccable teamwork. Teddy couldn't do it without Mika's absolute control of the other partisans. At a distance, he and his team could be mistaken for gangbangers rushing toward the fight. Mika kept the squad from shooting at their own flankers.

Teddy and his two men ran wide through the cemetery, then leapfrogged toward the gangbanger house until they had the enemy in a ninety-degree

angle with Mika's team. On They drew no fire as they closed into the side of the house with fewer windows.

"Gimme that." He waved Donnie Rocha forward with the 249 SAW belt-fed. The Green Berets had taught him: *don't do anything with a rifle you can do better with a belt-fed. If a few rounds is good, a few hundred rounds is probably better.*

Teddy settled in behind the SAW atop a wide, flat gravestone. The house with the gangbangers had solar panels across the roof. They'd seen it several times that morning; gangbangers gravitated toward solar power for some reason known only to them: maybe that was how they recharged their boom boxes or powered their margarita mixers.

"Fire team three engaging," Teddy said to Mika over the radio.

Waaa-aaaaaaah!

The M249 SAW chewed into the squat, stucco structure. In the yard, the place looked like an inner-city junkyard, with solar panels its only redeeming virtue. There were a half-dozen rusted-out vehicles and a bright blue, freestanding swimming pool. Teddy's hail of bullets made short work of the pool. Green, algae-laden water gushed out onto the stiff, dead lawn.

Teddy stitched a pattern of pock marks through the stucco three feet above ground, across the width of the building. Then he stitched it again for good measure.

When the last of his belt ran out, he radioed Mika. "Hold fire, Mika. We'll make entry"

Her team, behind a brick wall, quieted their guns. The *pock-pock-pock* of small arms fire still popped from inside the gangbanger house. The machine gun hadn't dissuaded them all.

Mika barked over the radio, "Hold up, Teddy. Don't go in. Let us put their heads down from here."

Teddy replied, "I'll still need to clear the place before we can pass. I might as well go in knowing where they're shooting from. Safe your guns,

Mika.”

“I don’t like it but I’ll do it anyway. Guns safe and elevated.”

“Moving in.” Teddy left the belt-fed behind on the grave marker. They’d recover it later. They only had the one 249 SAW barrel with them and now it glowed dark red.

Teddy and his two Sho-Pai buddies spread out and bounded from pine-to-pine toward the shot-up residential junkyard. The pistol fire inside the house slowed, then picked up again. The rounds weren’t buzzing his way, so Teddy proceeded, steady and smooth. They crossed the street and came up against a wall with a small, bathroom window. He motioned one man to go around front. He and the other looped around back.

They’d practiced house clearing a hundred times with the XTAC laser guns, but lasers didn’t shoot through walls. 5.56 bullets did. He hoped his Sho-Pai guy in the front remembered they were around back.

Teddy radioed his man in front. “Redman. Take cover in the front yard. Don’t go inside the house. Don’t shoot unless someone squirts. Good copy?” The hair on the back of Teddy’s head was standing straight up. His senses fizzed. He trusted Redman, but he didn’t trust him enough to enter a structure from opposite sides. He knew from training it’d be fifty-fifty they’d shoot each other.

“Good copy. I’m out front, posted up,” Redman answered.

Abe bounded to the opposite side of the back door and grinned. He should’ve been terrified, but Abe was the same lunatic who’d rushed a flipped Russian tank.

Teddy reached in, turned the knob and pushed. The door flew open and a fusillade of pistol rounds exploded from what appeared to be the kitchen. Teddy and Abe made themselves as skinny as they could behind the door frame.

When the shooting paused, Teddy dipped low into the doorframe, almost right above the level of the floor. He snapped three rounds into the legs of a

guy leaning across a rickety kitchen table.

The gangbanger howled and *ka-thunked* to the linoleum. Teddy risked another snap shot and drilled the screamer once in the chest. The howling tapered away like a locomotive going off the edge of a blown bridge.

Abe gave Teddy a wide-eyed look and a dramatic exhale. His expression said, *Holy shit. That just happened.*

Teddy shook his head to clear it, then grimaced at Abe. He tipped his head to the side, indicating that he'd be making entry first. Abe nodded understanding. They flowed into the house.

MIKA WHITEROCK WATCHED from across the street as Teddy and Abe snap-shot inside the gang house, then made entry. Her squad had spent the morning going street-by-street across southwestern Pueblo. Whenever the big army of native fighters encountered resistance, they sent for Mika, Teddy and their squad. The new guys weren't ready for door kicking.

They'd reorganized platoons and put Mika in charge of the twenty-man quick reaction force. Teddy and his fire team comprised their maneuver element, and they were all getting a lot of work.

While Teddy and his two men cleared the nest of bad guys, Mika's job was to keep the area secure. She watched, helpless, as her men made entry and duked it out face-to-face.

The air trembled as a grenade went off inside the house. Then, more shooting inside, followed by shooting in the front yard, on the opposite side of the house from Mika. Then another grenade. Then more shooting. She couldn't see any of it. She held her breath.

"Friendlies, coming out the back door," Teddy radioed and shouted. He waved his hand around the frame of the back door, then stepped outside. Abe followed. The two men high-fived each other and leaned against the house in

exhaustion. Teddy gave Mika a thumbs-up across the distance.

She exhaled audibly.

“Wow. Your man is some kind of man,” the Sho-Pai girl beside her remarked. Mika hadn’t even noticed she’d come up.

Mika’s team was lined up behind a low, cinder-block wall opposite the target house. Judy, had slid up beside her while Teddy and Abe played smash mouth CQB.

“We’re not together,” Mika corrected her.

The Navajo ladies in Window Rock, with their simple ways, had gotten under her skin. She felt less certain than she once did.

“*Hmm,*” the girl grunted. “You’re going to make beautiful babies.”

Mika almost tore her eyes away from the men to correct her again.

The adrenaline from the firefight, and the team’s brush with death buzzed in the back of Mika’s skull. It’d take a few minutes for the drug to subside.

In the meantime, her mouth grew a mind of its own. “Damn it all to hell.” Mika turned to Judy and smiled sheepishly. “You think they’ll turn out Republican?”

DUTCH HAD BEEN “ORGANIZED” out of the fighting by the Green Berets and hadn’t yet unwound their attempt at sidelining him. He felt a little untethered since the marathon days with the Navajo, but he still was no VIP, and he certainly wasn’t a battlefield commander. All arguments to the contrary were just the old world bumbling into the current reality. Dutch was a warrior and nothing more. Now that the Natives had joined them, he could go back to combat with a clear conscience.

The Special Forces commandos bumped Dutch around Pueblo as an overwatch sniper whenever a company of natives became decisively engaged. So far, he hadn’t fired his big rifle once. By the time he reached the

action, the Pueblo gangbangers would dig into a structure that had to be ferreted out by the QRFs. It was dangerous work, and Dutch worried furiously for his son.

Two days into the fight, Master Sergeant Daltrey called Dutch forward to the top of a parking garage. Joe Whiterock was there.

“How’re they doing this?” Joe Whiterock asked the SF commando.

Daltrey’s face was half-mummified in bandages and his words came out muffled by gauze. “We’ve placed the new recruits in reinforced companies, sweeping the city south-to-north.” Daltrey used his hand like a knife, running it over the city and sweeping the gangbangers north. “They’re training while they go. This is our chance to teach bounding and structure clearing. The native units move up the streets in heavy numbers until they hit a phase line—usually a big boulevard. There, everyone consolidates. Then we continue, one block at a time.”

“What’s all the shooting?” Joe pointed toward a pocket where gunfire crackled like a pine bough in the fire.

“When a company draws fire from a pocket of enemy resistance, they bottle them up and wait for the quick reaction force—QRF. Those are your kids from Duck Valley. They have more experience than the fresh *indig* troops. We call them up to work the problem areas. They’re doing the bulk of the door kicking: house clearing, suppressive fire, maneuver, grenades.”

“What are we doing with prisoners?” Joe asked.

“We could always send them on their way to Allah,” the big man said, putting a finger gun to his head and pulling the trigger. “*Pew*.”

“Not this time, I hope,” Dutch interjected. “Can we load them into a bus and send them to the Navajo?”

By the Master Sergeant’s shrug, Dutch could tell they’d already arranged it. There wasn’t much the professional soldiers didn’t plan out in advance. For every mission, there was a checklist. Warning Orders, Op Orders, orders of march, immediate action drills, route planning, rally points, casualty

handling, prisoner handling, cover stories, jobs on target, and the all-important *how to get back inside friendly lines*. There was nothing the Green Berets didn't discuss ahead of time. Combat with these guys was the furthest thing from impromptu.

Joe Whiterock changed the subject. "It's not going to be this easy against the Russians."

Daltrey answered, "Nope. Not by a long shot. We're going to need the Fourth Infantry for that one. If we send these kids head-to-head against Spetsnaz commandos, we'll be bagging up a lot of young'uns. My vote is we hammer the Russians with artillery rounds until they surrender—however long that takes."

"We might not have the time," Dutch answered. "If they figure out the launch codes, the Chinese will do the heavy lifting for them. Time is on their side."

"Fucking Russians." Daltrey seemed to agree. A new column of black smoke wormed skyward where the shooting had been hot a few minutes before. "It shouldn't be door-to-door against the Spetsnaz, though. We'll be hitting the Russians on open ground in the Wyoming missile fields. Our artillery will make it a very hard fight for them." Daltrey's eyes drew into squints. "Assuming Major General Harmer doesn't give us the hot beef injection."

Dutch barked a laugh.

"I apologize, sirs," Daltrey said. "I meant to say, *assuming Major General Harmer doesn't subject us to involuntary anal intercourse.*"

A grenade thundered in the distance and Dutch's laughter died. A second column of smoke threaded up toward the thickening layer of dark haze over Pueblo.

The radio in the MAT-V warbled and the comms soldier called out to Daltrey, "Master Sarge. We have control of the nuclear power plant."

That was something, Dutch thought. If the nuke plant had melted down, it

might've triggered a string of disasters for southern Colorado. Dutch worried for the nuke plants across the country. Some of them would eventually have issues, and it'd be serious. Maybe not Chernobyl-level serious, but maybe not that far off, either.

"Let's pop smoke and move up." Daltrey made the whirly-bird in the sky motion with his finger. "The troops just reached Abriendo Ave. We'll consolidate there, then cross the river. It's time to make us a gangbanger *sammich*." Daltrey made a squishing motion with his hands.

They'd bottled up the gangbangers at the bridges up against a blocking force of 10th Group Special Forces from Colorado Springs. The intact bridges that'd been used to funnel travelers into gangbanger traps were now used as walls to execute the criminals who still resisted. The SF guys were the hammer and the gangsters were the nail.

Dutch worried about his son. "This is going to suck, isn't it?" he asked Daltrey as they piled their weapons into the M-ATV. "This is going to be a hellacious battle."

"Meh," Daltrey answered. "Not really." Daltrey whipped back the tarp in the back compartment of the M-ATV. "Let me introduce you to *my little friend*, the sixty millimeter mortar. It magically turns enemy cover into rubble."

They'd taken a lot of risks to avoid hurting civilians in Pueblo. Anyone who didn't shoot at them was left alone. Belligerent gangbangers had been herded north. In the last few blocks, the army took off the gloves.

So far, they hadn't lost a single man. There were a few gun shot wounds and scraps, bumps and bruises, but the plan to eradicate the gang had stood the test of combat. The sheer number of the partisans—over 10,000 fighters—annihilated any gang member carrying a gun. Certainly, many gang members had melted into the gutters in the face of such a large force. The citizens of Pueblo would have to take it from there.

"Do it," Dutch agreed. "Let's get this done. We have a real war up north."

“Mr. President,” a voice he recognized called out. It was Russell Yellowhorse. Dutch hadn’t seen him since Window Rock. He carried a tall paper cup and a small, blue dog trotted beside him.

“Is that Honcho?” Dutch gasped. The dog had grown half-a-hand.

“Yes, sir.” Russell handed Dutch the coffee.

“How’d he get here?” Dutch asked. The dog was like a ghost from a past life—when Dutch used to live in a trailer with his beautiful wife, surrounded by kind friends. It was a life before war.

“The detachment that accompanied Mr. Whiterock brought him. Your wife thought you might want him with you.”

Sharon must’ve been very worried, hanging on every scrap of news from the partisans. Sending the dog was no hollow gesture. She knew Dutch better than he knew himself. She’d perceived his turmoil from hundreds of miles away and had sent the puppy as a balm. Dutch set the coffee on the bumper of the M-ATV, crouched down and ran his hands through the dog’s fur. His tail wagged furiously and he hopped up on his back legs, pressed his paws to Dutch’s chest and sniffled his ear.

The smell of dog swallowed Dutch whole, obliterating war and duty for a moment. Honcho licked the sweat off his sideburn. Dutch chuckled and held the puppy’s face so he could look in his eyes.

Sharon had been right again.

Dutch stood and handed the coffee back to Russell. “I can’t drink this. I’ll be up all night.” It was four in the afternoon.

“I know. That’s why it’s decaf.” Russell handed the coffee back.

Dutch laughed. “You realize you don’t have to get me coffee, right?”

Russell looked offended. “I do it ‘cause I want to.”

“Okay.” Dutch nodded. “Have it your way, but not even my wife knows I switch to decaf in the afternoon.”

Russell winked and pointed to his own coffee cup and then his temple. “We’re simpatico, you and me. On the same wavelength.”

Dutch paused to wonder if that was true—if somehow he was linked to the Paiute bait fisherman and the dog he'd given him.

"I'm just joking with you, sir," Russell said. "It's not good to take everything so durn serious."

Daltrey laughed, then slammed the back door of the M-ATV. "Yeah, Mr. President. Don't be so durn serious all the time. Let things take care of themselves."

Dutch didn't know how seriously to take that, either.

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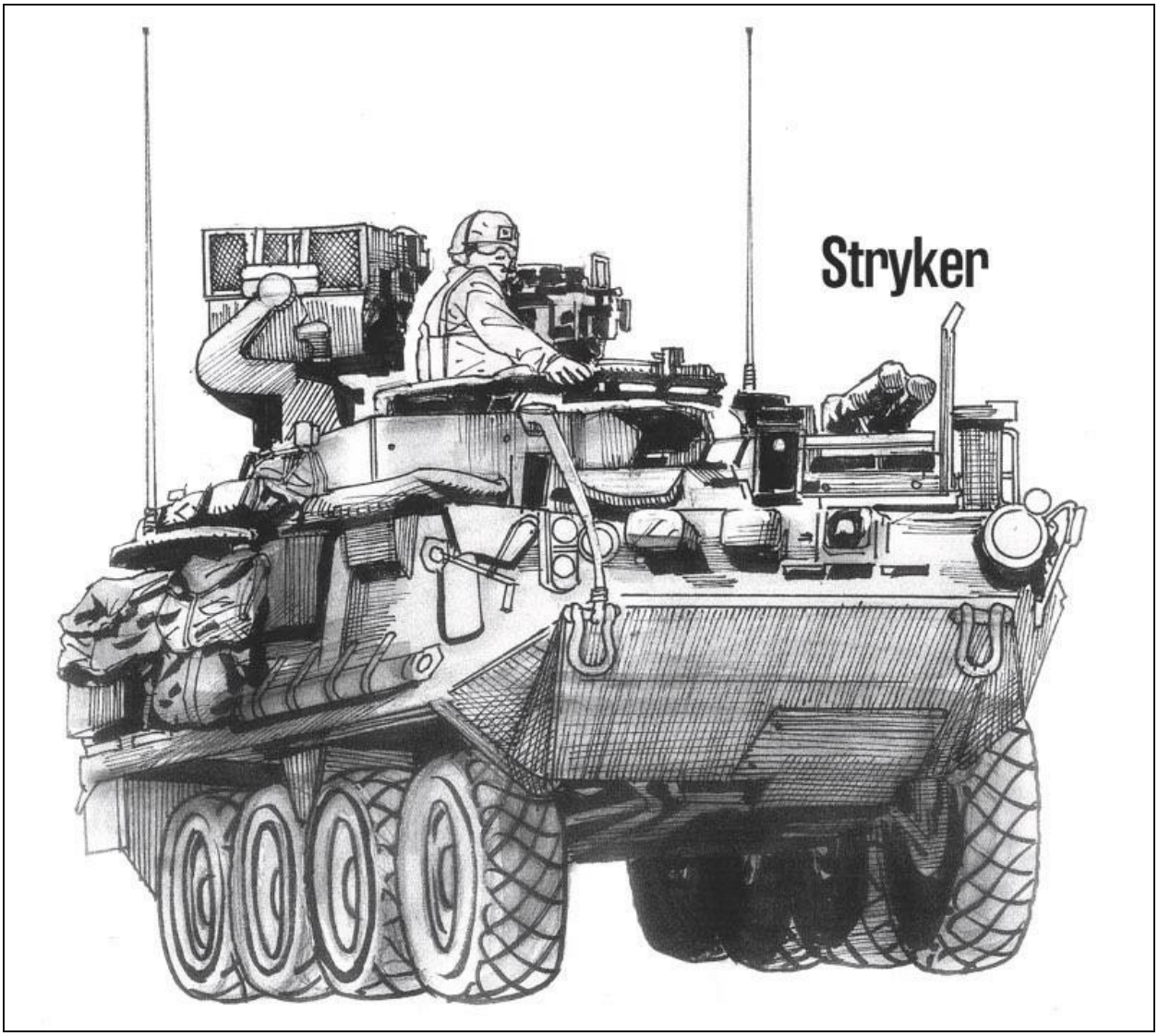

Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

A girl in high school once talked Bethany's ear off about how guilty she'd felt getting an abortion. Bethany understood the loss of a human life, but she didn't understand the need to talk about it. Why not do something about it? Like plant a tree?

Bethany felt bad about the deaths she'd caused in North Carolina, but if she saved a hundred lives in compensation, that made things right.

Glinda the Good Witch had a hack a mile wide into the old United States Space Force and its satellites. Much of her situational data on current events came from the network of military eyes-in-the-sky. Glinda had locational information on every human on the continent, alive or dead—plus the same with over thirty other countries.

Her friends, at war with the Russians in Wyoming, and now Colorado, could do a lot with the satellite feeds at her disposal, but they hadn't asked for them. She and Glinda had a rule about those kinds of things: don't answer questions people didn't ask. If she and Glinda started answering the questions the people *should've* asked, they'd spend all their data cycles chasing some cosmic needle where humans invented time travel or formulated the perfect salad dressing.

Still, there was the matter of the hundred lives she and Glinda had taken to build a bubble around Glinda's Top Secret Clubhouse on the Apple Computer iCloud server farm.

Bethany allowed herself a thin stream of emotion, down her center, warming her. It was a new thing: allowing her blood to run. She'd heard them call her "Sagehen." She knew what it meant, sort of. Together, she and Glinda were something special. Almost supernatural. The rationale justified her slipping a finger onto the scales of fate.

The Russians had mobilized a battalion of paratroopers in Wyoming and

they were moving south on a collision course with Mika Whiterock and her force of Native Americans in Colorado.

The Russians monitored their satellite feeds on a 300 meter scale from Wyoming down to Colorado City. The analysts in Krasnoyarsk were paying close attention to the actions of the 4th Infantry Division in Colorado Springs. They just about knew what kind of MRE each guy had to eat. They wanted the 4th Infantry Division to stay disorganized while they passed through to NORAD.

Bethany wrote a little switcharoo program that swapped the Russian military satellite feed with a Google Earth satellite feed that she'd sent to hover over Colorado for the last month. She slipped in last week's image feed as the Russian's own, live satellite feed. They wouldn't see the ten thousand armed Native Americans arrive, nor would they see the 4th Infantry Division or the 10th Group Special Forces mobilize.

She considered sharing satellite imagery with her "friendly" troops. Bethany didn't need a predictive algorithm to know how that story would end. She and Glinda would spend the rest of their days picking apart tactical landscapes. Their benefactors would want to know everything about everything: individual survivors, global energy use, disposition of militaries, containment of every nuclear power plant in the world, whether or not Sweet Aunt Bertha survived…the list would be endless. Glinda's computational cycles would turn from ensuring the future of humanity to satisfying everyone's curiosity. Her friends couldn't know that she had satellite feeds.

Humans were horrible at focus. They couldn't tell the difference between what needed to be known and what was useless to know. They dedicated less than 1% of their mental computational cycles on predictive analysis, and almost all of their thinking on the dramatic past.

Why this, why that? Regret. Guilt. Trauma. Redemption. *Dumb, dumb, dumb.*

Bethany refused to dedicate the historic potential of Glinda to working

through human angst. By not giving them control over Glinda's many talents, she was actually protecting humankind from themselves.

If they didn't like it, they could get bent.

PRESIDENT DUTCH MCADAMS met Major General Harmer on the vast armor staging area of Fort Carson. The military vehicles covered a mile of blacktop. It appeared he'd amassed a devastating force. That comfortable, old sense of domination began to creep back into Dutch's shoulders. He sat straighter as he looked over the fighting vehicles—*his* fighting vehicles.

Harmer preened as he drove Dutch on a tour of the hundreds of Strykers and Paladin self-propelled artillery vehicles. He rattled off the immense capacity of the shells they could fire, the power of the explosives and the stunning range of the guns.

At first glance, the sea of tan-painted steel looked like an invincible juggernaut. But as Harmer talked, reality slowly settled in. They reached the edges of the blacktop and Dutch looked back. This was a shadow of the mighty Fourth Infantry Division.

The Stryker Brigade had subsumed an entire infantry brigade into its ranks and still remained light. They fielded only two hundred vehicles compared to their former three hundred, and many of them were engineering, medical evacuation and anti-tank missile rigs. All were ferociously armed, but Dutch's questions peeled back their weakness: if the Russians brought tanks or strike aircraft to the fight, it would go hard on the Strykers.

The Fourth ID's armored brigade had been in California on a training mission when Black Autumn froze the railways and shut off the flow of fossil fuels. What remained, after catastrophic desertion and equipment deficiencies, was a light Stryker brigade, a dozen Paladin self-propelled Howitzers and fifteen tow-behind artillery guns. It'd been months since the

4th had flown any kind of aviation asset. The logistical support necessary to fly no longer existed. On top of those weaknesses, the Fourth Infantry Division had only the munitions stored in the base ammunition holding area. Fort Carson had been coming up on scheduled artillery practice when the collapse hit, so there were just enough arty shells for one or two engagements.

Dutch's concept of a conflict with the Russians had shifted with the Native American troops. Before, Dutch hoped to win against the Russians, whatever the cost. Now, he pinned his prayers on wiping them out with little loss of American life. With a light infantry division, the 10th Group Special Forces plus 10,000 green recruits, they could beat them, but at what cost?

"Thank you, General Harmer. Your country deeply appreciates your willingness to serve," Dutch praised the officer with the words he needed to hear. Secretly, Dutch longed to get back to his job.

Harmer smiled and nodded. "We're all in this together, sir."

Such bullshit. Dutch breathed through his irritation.

"We head north tomorrow morning, first light," Dutch said. It was the plan suggested by the Special Forces Colonel Devlin—that they engage the Russian company as far north of Colorado Springs as possible.

"Ready to roll," Harmer said. "Let's kick their asses all the way back to Canada."

TO TEDDY, it looked like a genuine army that buzzed around the blacktop seas of Fort Carson.

Colonel Devlin, commanding officer of 10th Group Special Forces, came down out of the mountain stronghold of Woodland to lead the Special Forces and the natives. General Harmer would command his own troops.

The Native American forces were now organized and bloodied under the

tutelage of the ODA commandos. They were veterans, albeit green ones. Colonel Devlin had placed Master Sergeant Daltrey in permanent command of the indigenous element—the native army. Four hundred additional Special Forces troops came to fight as assaulters. The ten, reorganized ODAs would act as quick reaction forces for the brimming companies of First People. The SF group left a small detachment in Woodland to protect their families, then sent every other available commando to fight.

Teddy didn't hear the customary brashness in the Special Forces guys. Usually, they came off as relentless killing machines, ruthless, even cavalier about war. As they rolled out of Fort Carson, their hubris dried up like a dirty joke in a room full of church ladies. Teddy attributed it to wearing their game faces, but he wondered.

For Teddy and the rest of the civilized world, the apocalypse had been a crash course in the gritty realities of survival. Even after four months, Teddy needed a moment to get his mind around to killing another man.

But the commandos didn't mind brutality one bit. They'd gone from Apocalypse A to Apocalypse B without any hand-wringing whatsoever. Most of them had cycled back and forth on deployments to Afghanistan and Syria—and many had side-tracked over to shadowy contracting jobs. The commandos' notion of Rule of Law had been thin when the apocalypse began. It was virtually non-existent now. A license to kill couldn't be handed back like an expired library card.

But the SF commandos didn't brim with bravado as they set out that dawn in a ten-mile convoy of Strykers, artillery, MAT-Vs, Humvees and hundreds of civilian vehicles. They sulked in their seats, cradling their M4s. Their ceaseless ribbing took on a darker tone. They talked no smack whatsoever on the Russian Spetsnaz they'd soon face. It was a head-to-head fight between two units of utter professionals, fully armed and technical. A lot could go wrong. Even with much larger numbers, the American commandos' respect for the Spetsnaz was engraved in their hard eyes and

cable-tight brows.

One of the SF guys in Teddy's Humvee remarked, "Kinda makes you think back fondly for the good days against dumbshit terrorists."

One of the SF guys referred to the Spetsnaz soldiers as "OG" or "Original Gangsters." The commandos' ominous respect set Teddy's nerves on edge. He'd faced the Russians once already, and it'd been an ass-kicking. This could be true, bloody-knuckle war, with no guaranteed outcomes, despite their superior numbers.

Colonel Devlin had assigned two ODAs to scout ahead on the miles-long column, both equipped with RQ-11 Raven unmanned aerial vehicles.

Outside Castle Rock, Devlin radioed, "All Stations, this is Dingo. Rendezvous at rally point Lima, soonest. All commanders report."

"So soon?" Mika Whiterock asked the commandos in the front seat. She'd jumped into the Humvee next to Teddy in Colorado Springs. At first, it seemed like she had something she wanted to say, but then she'd gone quiet. The tension in the cab had been thick as coffee sludge. Teddy focused on the fight. If he let the wild ponies in his heart run right now, he might screw up. He felt the heat coming off her and he could hardly contain his anxiety. *What the hell was going on with her?*

"Something's wrong," MSG Billings remarked. They'd only driven fifty miles north of Colorado Springs.

They were still in the foothill towns south of Denver, and they would soon turn east to dogleg around the city. Their plan had been to overnight in Fort Collins, a handful of miles south of the Wyoming border. Almost before they began, they were being ordered to stop, twenty miles short of Denver. Starting and stopping the massive column required over an hour of coordinated shuffling. This was no potty break, but the radio offered no details.

Teddy and Mika joined the command meeting formed up around Colonel Devlin's MAT-V. Someone had thrown up a hastily-erected, double-thick

camo netting. Teddy figured it for concealment against drones.

“We’ve got company,” Colonel Devlin explained. “Our boys picked up aerial video of a Russian scout unit north of Denver. We have to assume they’re surveilling us right now with UAVs.”

Major General Harmer stepped deeper under the netting. “How do you know they’re Russians?”

“A GAZ Tigr Jeep SUV was visible in surveillance footage, and a troop of soldiers in snow camo were deploying ISR monitoring equipment. The Russians are here, gentlemen…lady and gentlemen.”

“That could be a long-range reconnaissance patrol,” Harmer challenged.

“True. The scouts we saw are at the outer limit of our UAV range. My scouts are moving up to get a better look. I suggest we halt the column until we have a firm idea what we’re up against.” Devlin glanced at Harmer, to see if the higher-ranking officer approved.

It was a strange dance between the two officers. Harmer outranked the Special Forces Colonel, but the Special Forces group had more pull with Teddy’s dad. The two officers steeped their words in professional courtesy, perhaps to smooth over the foggy chain of command. It was better for everyone if the two agreed. If a decision had to be appealed to the president, Teddy didn’t honestly know if Harmer would comply.

The SF group, technically, was AWOL, given that they’d refused SecDef Greaney’s orders. They were deserters. But the president had pardoned them. Yet, Teddy’s dad wasn’t here under the command tarp. Teddy didn’t know why. It might’ve been better for his father to take command, but he kept drifting off with the Green Berets and Russell Yellowhorse. He seemed content to let the military experts hash everything out. To Teddy, it looked like a dangerous way to run a railroad.

“If some or all of the Russians are here,” Colonel Devlin speculated, “and if they know we’re in this position, they’ll make a run for Denver. It’s what I’d do if I were them. They’re Spetsnaz, not big army. They’ll burrow into

the buildings and hold Denver like the insurgents held Faluja. We need to head them off before they get under cover."

"Sir," a comms lieutenant called from the Colonel's MAT-V. "We have ODA 423 on the horn. They see BMD-3s on ISR coming south down I-25. At least a company, maybe more."

"Location?" Colonel Devlin barked.

The lieutenant ducked back into the cab, spoke on the radio, then dashed to Devlin with a map. Colonel Harmer stepped in to see. "They're already through Fort Collins and their lead element is near the town of Loveland."

Devlin's voice took an edge as he pleaded with General Harmer. "If we haul ass forward right now with my commandos and your Paladins, we can stop them before they cross the Saint Vrain River. You can shell the bridges and force them to fight on open ground. Your tow-behind artillery will chew them up on the plains. They'll be forced to retreat back to Fort Collins in disarray. They must not know we're here yet."

"Just let's stop for a moment and think," Harmer raised a hand. "Why are they coming south? And why just a couple companies of Russians? That'd be a few hundred men, at the most. There's no way they flew full-sized tanks from Russia. Maybe light BMDs, but not main battle tanks. That unit's no match for the 4th ID—no matter where they dig in."

"My scouts can only see one company because our UAV can't get over the entirety of their force. There's probably more," Devlin argued. "A Spetsnaz unit would be around six or seven hundred. We need to take them seriously—treat them like a battalion. Without armor and artillery, the 4th would murder them on the plains. If we let them get into Denver, it'll be the kind of fight the Spetsnaz like. If we go right now, your Stryker brigade and Paladins can be in-position along the Northwest Parkway by fourteen hundred hours. Tenth Group can run point for you."

"You don't know this ground like we do, Colonel." Harmer shook his head. "*We* held the cordon around Denver."

Teddy saw it was meant as an insult—a backhanded reference to the 10th Group's refusal to obey orders.

"It's not just a matter of zipping around the belt route and setting up on the Parkway. Civil disorder bulged out into these neighborhoods here, here and here—and its gotten worse since we pulled out. The belt route isn't open and cleared. We'll get hung up dealing with the criminal element. You haven't scouted this area. We have."

Dutch joined the meeting around the vehicle, at last. He meandered in and the officers studied his face, then continued. Teddy felt hopeful at first that his dad would take command, but Dutch just listened.

"Your men are all rolling in Strykers!" Devlin raised his voice. "You can blow past local resistance."

Harmer treated him to a hard look. "The local gangs will have set up roadblock ambushes with burned-out cement trucks, trash trucks and semis. They'll be stacked, burned and immobile. You don't know these people like I do. They're human garbage. 'Blowing right past' them isn't as easy as you think. Let's say we tried your plan and it takes even one extra hour to get around the Denver belt route. What then? I'll tell you: we will confront the Russians with vulnerable artillery on this side of the Saint Vrain River. What are we supposed to do when they blitzkrieg inside our ranks? If I were them, I'd push fast and hard, and prevent the use of our artillery. That's in the Spetsnaz playbook. I'm not sending my infantry into harm's way to go nose-to-nose with Russian paratroopers and god-knows-what air support."

Teddy's dad spoke up, at last. "We don't believe they have air support. They didn't three weeks ago when we engaged them in Wyoming. Our intelligence asset outside Cheyenne hadn't seen helicopters or anything larger than a small UAV."

Harmer turned to Dutch. "Sir, are you willing to bet this army on three-week-old intelligence? Who knows what they flew in over the last month. They can't fly in main battle tanks, but they can certainly fly in attack helos. I

have twelve Paladin mobile Howitzers. Just twelve. If we lose them, we'll be fist-fighting those Russians."

"I'm all for that! We have them outnumbered." Colonel Devlin threw up his hands. "We're not going to have the intelligence you're used to General, sir. We need to act *now* on the intelligence we have." The Special Forces officer looked to the president with pleading eyes, but everyone under the canopy knew: even the president couldn't force Harmer to do something he didn't want to do. Not four months into the apocalypse.

"That's not how the real army plays it, *Colonel*," Harmer ended the debate. "We set up right here and let them pass through Denver and meet us here on the field of battle. We have the high ground, and we can have the towed artillery ready for them."

"Well, we can always hope that the Spetsnaz are dumb enough to walk into artillery fire, I guess." Colonel Devlin barely concealed his contempt. "So what are your orders, sir?" he asked Dutch.

Teddy could tell his father wasn't going to resolve the impasse. His shoulders were too relaxed and his eyes drifted from one officer to the other, weighing their words and their character. Finally, he spoke,"I would love to be able to add something to the discussion, but I don't know the first thing about artillery, mounted troops, armor and what the Russians might or might not have flown into Warren Air Force Base. I suppose we have no choice but to go with the lowest vote." He looked to Major General Harmer as he said it.

"Not the *lowest* vote, sir," the general corrected. "The most-judicious vote. And, we're not voting. This isn't Congress. This is the United States Army and we follow the chain of command."

Teddy sighed. The squabbling of the officers didn't bode well for the men on the ground. He wished his father would weigh in strong and side with Devlin. Any plan was better than no plan, and Harmer's plan sounded like "wait and see."

As he watched his father's face, he noticed the shadows of past conflicts

and the buffeting of a thousand negotiations. He saw no certainty in his eyes.

Harmer glared at Devlin and Devlin glared back. The lives of thousands would, once again, take a ride on the Ego Express.

MIKA CAME to Teddy after the Spetsnaz rushed forward, and took cover in Denver.

The Russians must've detected the American force about the same time as the ODA scouts detected them. Within three hours, as predicted by Colonel Devlin, they crossed the Saint Vrain and disappeared into the tens of thousands of homes, businesses and high-rise buildings in the rotting metropolis. The table was set. The fates had cast their grisly bones. Death was etched, once again, over the concrete tableaus of Denver.

There was no ambivalence in Mika's words when she approached Teddy. "I want you with me," she said as she took hold of the front of his shirt. At first, he thought she meant for a meeting, but that didn't make sense given her handful of his fatigue jacket. "I want you with me for my life," she clarified.

His legs lost sensation and he almost had to sit down. He'd loved her for months, and there hadn't been the slightest flicker of reciprocation. Teddy had concluded they were too politically opposed to be together.

For his part, he couldn't give a shit less about politics. He adored her, part and parcel with her worldview and her snarling intensity. She was the most intriguing creature he'd ever met.

That evening, by the Humvee, while his legs quaked, she said it so straightforwardly there could be no confusion: "I want to be with you."

Just like that, his future straightened out like a cord—from that moment into the setting sun. They would be together. They would make a family—if they survived combat.

Teddy felt a new, voracious imperative, roiling in his gut: he must survive, mate and create life. He must protect this woman with his dying breath. He would not quit until his final drop of blood seeped into the ground. He would fight like a lion, because his lioness now stood beside him. He gasped as a thundercloud conviction swamped his good nature: he was a warrior now, more than ever.

As the sun set over the Rockies, and the Russians seized control of Denver, Teddy and Mika vanished from the world, and cemented their love.

Teddy's tent was strewn with clothes. They hadn't even bothered to zip their sleeping bags together. They made love in the frost-plumed mountain air, and the inner wall of the tent dripped with moisture from their billowing breath. For hours they explored one another's bodies and tasted new love on their tongues. Their partisan friends had the good sense to leave them alone. It was the night before war, and love blotted out everything else.

Between passion, Mika spoke into the dark, "I wonder if Devlin's word will pull more weight from here on out."

Teddy wasn't ready for that kind of talk. He couldn't make it back to reality from so far away. In his mind, Devlin and Harmer were like laughable dervishes, prattling and agitating about a drama that had nothing to do with the only thing that mattered now—this woman. This cocoon. This touch.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, Teddy remembered reading in the Bible. Jesus had said it, he thought. Each day had its ample suffering, and there was no sense in borrowing misery from the future. Their future promised plenty of suffering, and their past had its fair share as well.

"Marry me," Teddy whispered in her ear.

"Yes," she said, with a smile on her voice in the dark. "That's what I meant when I said *I want you in my life*. Should we have a big to-do with flowers, a photographer and cake?"

"Absolutely," he laughed, "or whatever we can pull together in the next thirty minutes."

“Now?” she giggled.

“Is there a tomorrow?” Teddy mused. “I can’t remember. It doesn’t seem like it.”

“It’s eleven thirty at night,” she chided.

“Excellent. Then we know exactly where to find everybody. You get the gang and I’ll get my dad.” Teddy was already pulling his pants over his feet.

She went to work locating her clothes, chuckling while she worked. She stopped moving. He sensed it in the dark.

“What’s wrong?” He feared she’d changed her mind.

“Every day, for the rest of our lives; assuming we both don’t die, it’ll going to be about survival. Just survival.”

“*Shhh*.” He stroked her hair. “We have this right now. It’ll never be just survival after this. This is forever. Alive or dead. This world or the next.”

“*Hmmm*,” she hummed the truth of his words. “Yes. But I’d give anything to have children with you. A family. It’s all I can think about now.”

“That’s what we fight for, then,” he said. “Now put on your pants. You have a wedding to attend.”

IT WAS midnight under the icy stars, and a half-moon glinted, sharp and crystalline overhead. It cast a blue light that bespoke mythic creatures and epic love. Whispers darted around the hushed camp. Mika and Teddy’s squad came, rumpled hair and grinning faces. Master Sergeant Daltrey attended as well as Colonel Devlin.

Joe Whiterock gave his granddaughter away. His dress shirt was mis-buttoned, offset by two whole rows. The camp was on light discipline and Mika’s grandpa had no red flashlight. She stood in front of him and rebuttoned his shirt in the light of her red headlamp.

“Are you happy now, you old goat?” she whispered to him in the dark.

“Hark. It is as I prophesied. Do you not remember?” Joe joked. “My granddaughter and the President’s son.”

“Oh stop.” She flicked a button. “It’s not like that. We’re just soldiers.”

“Where the East meets the West, hope is born,” her grandfather said. If it was a quote, she didn’t know it. “I’m so pleased for you, Mourning Dove.”

President Dutch McAdams wasn’t a pastor, but he possessed authority from a beloved, past world. It seemed enough to overwhelm any ecclesiastical qualms. Teddy had convinced him to conduct the ceremony.

The wedding party shivered under the clear sky. Their chattering teeth set them all on the edge of laughter. None had ever attended a midnight wedding ceremony, but it fit the moment perfectly. Man seized joy where he could against the backdrop of doomsday. They stood against the winter mountains, blocking the Russians from the buried city of NORAD, in a fierce plea for America to have one, last chance.

“At this point, nothing surprises me,” Dutch began the service. “We return to the church where our ancestors worshipped: the ceiling of stars and the chandelier of mother moon. Tomorrow, we fight, so tonight we love. Teddy and Mika, do you choose each other under the watchful eye of Alpha and Omega, the God of the end, and hopefully, the beginning?”

“I do,” Mika said.

“I do,” Teddy replied.

“Then with God and Jesus Christ above and the good Mother Earth beneath, I bless you as husband and wife.” Dutch McAdams found Mika’s face in the dark with his hands, pulled her close and kissed her on the forehead. “Welcome to our family. You may kiss your bride, son.”

The little crowd roared. It woke up half the camp, and sent them scurrying, confused for their rifles.

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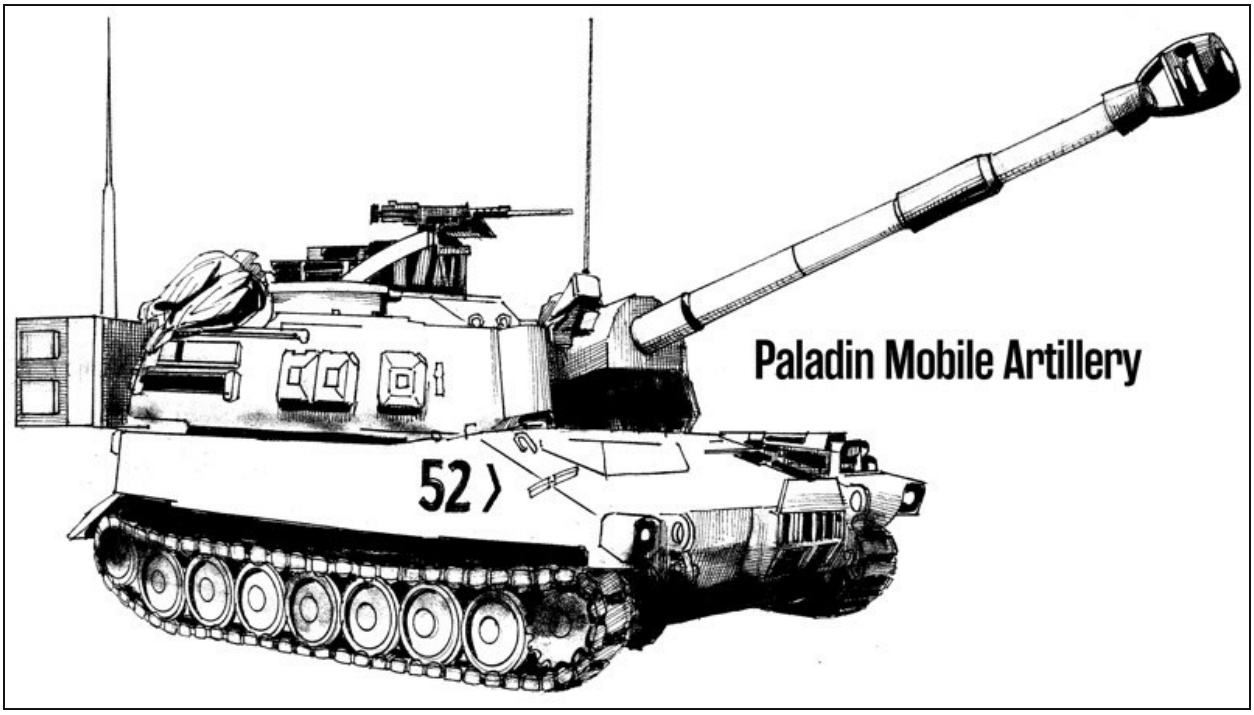

Atop the Wells Fargo Building
Denver, Colorado

Vitaly missed his brazier. The tiny, iron firebox had been too heavy to take with him on the road. Consequently, he was freezing his stones off on top of a high rise building. In the background, he could overhear the

radio chatter of the battalion. They'd placed him as overwatch alongside the comms relay. The posting provided Vitaly with forewarning of their doom.

Recon teams reported in: American artillery encircled the city and sealed them from retreat. They could attempt to scurry back to Wyoming, but artillery batteries twenty kilometers away would tear them to pieces for their trouble.

For now, they were safe inside the concrete cliffs and valleys of the city center—the Americans dare not shell their own city. There were still tens of thousands of people living like rats in the wreckage. Artillery would have to level every building to flush the Russians out. They couldn't possibly have that quantity of munitions.

Safe as the battalion might be for the moment, this would be their tomb. If Russians had learned one thing from the gristmill of World War Two, it was that numbers mattered. Even after technology took its toll, the number of men almost always dictated the winner. According to a sudden burst of satellite intelligence from Krasnoyarsk, their 600 man Spetsnaz unit faced over 15,000 enemy, equipped with Howitzers, Strykers and MAT-V armored vehicles.

Nobody could explain why the satellites hadn't seen this coming. If they'd known the Americans had rallied from the wreckage to meet them in force, they would've fled north and abandoned Warren. They certainly wouldn't have risked an assault on NORAD. In a jolting refresh of satellite intelligence, they'd suddenly found themselves in the middle of a scenario a lot worse than "Red Dawn." They had no choice but to flee for cover from the artillery. Reaching NORAD went from being a "pleasant road trip" to a complete impossibility.

The city crackled with sporadic gunfire, even as the American army solidified their siege positions. The Spetsnaz called in small arms engagements almost everywhere they took shelter. They were steadily losing soldiers to disjointed resistance from survivors within the city. Twelve hours

after taking up positions in the city, they faced an unpredictable and shiftless enemy: gangsters, militia, and survivalists. They couldn't tell if the locals fought to take their food, to steal their guns or just for entering their "turf." Orders were to shoot anyone not wearing Spetsnaz snow camo.

Death wasn't assured for the battalion. Command was preparing to send the other Spetsnaz battalions, in Montana and South Dakota, to rescue them. There was talk of air assets en route from Russia. His unit would never surrender; not because of Spetsnaz *esprit de corps,* but because they would die either way. The Americans didn't have the food to comply with the Geneva Convention. Captured Russians would be lined up and shot, or worse yet, made to starve. Vitaly's Spetsnaz battalion would fight to the last man.

Even as the wraith-thin locals picked at them from all sides, the Spetsnaz prepared street-by-street traps and ambushes meant to sap the Americans' will to fight. Making them bleed rivers of blood was the battalion's best chance of being allowed to leave.

Street gangs weren't the worst of it. Denver festered with dead corpses. Every street, every apartment, every business and every commode harbored the dead. The Americans hadn't even attempted to bury them. There were no mass graves in Denver, just rotting corpses wherever starving people had slowed, then collapsed into eternal sleep.

The scent of putrescence—the ever-present odor of rotting eggs and sickly-sweet cheeses—pervaded every indoor space and the open air as well. The dead would re-freeze at night, only to awaken to the gleeful gnawing of bacteria in the afternoon. The hideous smell, strengthened with the warming of the asphalt and concrete, then waned, slightly, for the hard freeze of midnight.

Thousands, even millions of dead, littered the once-idyllic neighborhoods and shopping malls of of the mountain city. It was a mystery to Vitaly and his comrades: why hadn't these people fled into the countryside? Why stay here to perish from hunger? The Russians had seen herds of cattle and fields of

winter-dry alfalfa north of Denver. Why would American citizens remain in the city and die?

The mystery fueled the haunting, which then terrified the men. The bodies, some said, could be heard crackling at night—some secret horror caused the rotting bodies to shift and twist as they refroze. The superstitious Russians wove tales of anguished ghosts and vengeful, American ghosts as they huddled around their propane camp stoves, heating vodka-tea and mumbling curses against their black luck.

Denver was no place to die, but Vitaly's unit had taken refuge in a graveyard. Death was their fate, but they were Spetsnaz even before they were doomed. They might die here, but they would reap a harvest of souls before they joined the suffering dead.

The only thing worse than death would be to die easily, and no Spetsnaz would give up his ghost until he'd taken at least ten or twenty with him.

"SEND IN THE STRYKERS, you *fucking coward!*" Colonel Devlin screamed in Major General Harmer's face.

Dutch's fighting force was crumbling, even with the Russians cornered in Denver. The puppy had followed Dutch into the command tent—it followed him everywhere now—and he shuffled back and forth on his front feet, sensing the tension in the room. The puppy whined under his breath.

"*Pfft.*" Harmer waved away the colonel's disdain. "Don't be a fool. Russian Spetsnaz soldiers sleep with anti-tank missiles tucked in their underwear bands. If we send Strykers to go street-by-street, the Russians will take pleasure in killing them all. The factories aren't making any more armored vehicles, if you hadn't noticed, Devlin. When we lose one Stryker, it's gone forever—not to mention the men inside. Another eight percent of my force went AWOL when we deployed from Colorado Springs. I can't risk

men and machines like we're fighting Desert Storm. There is no resupply, *Colonel*."

Devlin turned to Dutch in exasperation. "If we annihilate these Spetsnaz here and now, the Russians will rethink this expedition. Even if their government's still standing in Moscow, things have got to be very hard for them. The Russian armor probably can't be replaced either. If they're contemplating a border war with China, the only reason they're here is to score an easy win. Using our nukes against the Chinese makes sense, *if* they can get them without too high a cost. We'll never have a better chance to convince them our missiles don't come cheap. We can end this here and now if we wipe out the troops trapped in Denver. We have overwhelming force. We have them surrounded. Mr. President, order a full-scale assault."

"Okay," Dutch agreed. "We attack with everything we've got."

Major General Harmer raised his hands. "Hold on. We can't do that. If we go in there like John Wayne, I won't come out with enough of a force to protect Colorado Springs."

Colonel Devlin slammed his fist against the table. A pen holder jumped and fell to the floor. Soldiers outside the command post suddenly stopped talking. The puppy yipped.

"You mean you won't have enough of a force to protect your Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," Devlin seethed. "Enjoy your mansion, Harmer, *until it gets nuked*."

The General chuffed and tilted his head, unimpressed with the accusation or the threat. "The Fourth Infantry Division will provide artillery cover for this operation. Use your ten thousand screaming Indians against the Russians, if you have such a hard-on to kill them. Don't waste professional soldiers on it."

"We appreciate your artillery support, but you must reconsider," Dutch said. "The Russians weren't expecting a coordinated, military response from us. If we hit them with artillery and overwhelming ground forces, they might

leave. We can't do that without you."

"*What?*" Devlin exclaimed. "Why are you quibbling with this airbag. Order him to go in."

Dutch had already issued the order, and Harmer had refused. Only a fool would up his bet after the bluff had been called. Dutch had no ace up his sleeve. He needed Harmer to agree to the attack.

"I don't see my men adding anything to the ground assault worthy of the risk," Harmer said. "Your shock troops will accomplish the same thing without risking high value assets." He sounded like he was being reasonable, but Dutch recognized it for what it was: naked refusal of a lawful order.

Colonel Devlin stormed out of the tent.

"Excuse me," Dutch said and followed the Special Forces Colonel out. The puppy trotted after him.

"Colonel Devlin," Dutch called.

The officer slowed his pace and turned.

"How can you allow that?" Devlin hissed. "How can you permit him to refuse an order?"

Dutch dropped his voice almost to a whisper. "Because the Army's gone, Colonel Devlin. Harmer's not an actual general. You're not an actual colonel. I'm not an actual president. We're guerrilla fighters, and we're each here for our own reasons. You're right about Harmer—he only cares about his fiefdom. He's not going to risk his command if he doesn't have to. Stop for a second and think about what would happen if he gave us what we want. If we roll into Denver alongside Harmer's Strykers, we'll be looking over our shoulders the entire time. We could never count on his men to have our backs. In a way, Harmer's right. We're probably better off going into the city with your commandos and my natives. I don't mind kissing Harmer's ass, and ignoring his disloyalty, to keep our artillery coverage. Can you see?"

Devlin's scowl broke. "I'm not kissing that blue falcon's ass."

"Blue falcon?"

“Buddy fucker. A soldier looking out only for himself.” Devlin tapped his chest.

Dutch nodded. “I see, but we can worry about Harmer later. Right now, it’s you and me, and 10,000 natives. In the meantime, we need Harmer to keep the Russians bottled up.”

“How reliable are these *indig* troops, sir? What did you horse-trade to get them?”

Dutch rubbed his forehead, “I didn’t give them anything.”

A shadow passed over Devlin’s face. “When you don’t understand why an ally is fighting alongside you, that’s when you’re about to get stabbed in the back.”

Dutch knew what the natives wanted; the weird thing with the Constitution. But he didn’t feel like explaining it to Devlin. On top of kowtowing to Harmer just now, Dutch didn’t believe he could maintain the man’s respect if he admitted he’d been slowly warming to the natives’ request. Maybe the Indians had provided the troops assuming Dutch would give in, as a token of gratitude, after they defeated the Russians. Maybe they knew something Dutch couldn’t comprehend. The time with the Navajo had eroded his certainty, enlarged his sense of history unfolding around them. But if Dutch told Devlin about the Constitutional amendments, the colonel would probably ask “what do they want changed?”

Dutch could muddle through an explanation, but he was foggy on the specifics. The changes were so random it made them hard to recall. As intelligent as Colonel Devlin was, he was no lawyer nor constitutional scholar. He was a commando, and in the three weeks Dutch had been embedded with the 10th Group, he’d learned the dark side of SF collaboration with indigenous personnel: they didn’t trust anyone who didn’t wear the stars and stripes. *Indig* troops were assets. They weren’t family. If Dutch told Colonel Devlin about amendments to the U.S. Constitution, it’d reinforce Devlin’s suspicion and compromise his confidence in Dutch.

Colonel Devlin saw the world as black-and-white—and he might be right; the natives could be a trap ready to spring.

Dutch punted. “Maybe they are here to preserve the land. Arguably, they have more to lose than we do.”

Colonel Devlin nodded but didn’t appear convinced. “I’d get clear with them, sir, if I were you. I’d start with him.” The colonel pointed at Joe Whiterock, walking toward them. He looked stiff, like he’d slept uncomfortably. Tent living probably didn’t agree with a man in his eighties.

Devlin stepped toward Joe with his hand outstretched. “Good morning, sir. I trust you slept well.”

“Nobody told me that I’d be sleeping on the ground during the apocalypse. You should know: I’ll be filing a complaint with management,” Joe joked.

Dutch shook Joe’s hand.

“You’ll excuse me,” Colonel Devlin said, “I have a ground assault to plan.” He turned and marched toward the Special Forces encampment.

The two aging gentlemen watched the soldiers tearing down their overnight camp. The partisan army would be relocating headquarters to Chatfield Reservoir on the edge of the city.

“Do you think we’ll survive this?” Joe asked as Devlin walked out of earshot; he looked like a dog that’d spent the night at the vet. War was not a game for senior citizens. But Dutch wasn’t a senior citizen anymore, at least not in his heart. If he died tomorrow on the trash-strewn streets of Denver, he’d end his life a warrior, not a politician. He’d hate to leave Sharon and the kids, but his life as a soldier felt like coming home—returning to the mountains and the sky. Real life and real death.

Dutch agreed with Joe anyway. “I had a rock digging into my hip all night.” He stretched at the waist.

Whiterock chuckled. “No you didn’t, you old liar. You’re as right as rain.” He crouched slowly and painfully to get on the level of Dutch’s puppy.

He ruffled the puppy's mane and ran his hand across his nose.

Dutch changed the subject. "I'm not going to let them sideline me."

"You're a liar *and* a fool. How is it that a man gets into his sixties and he's still not smart enough to avoid a fight?"

Dutch saw an opening to talk about the movements of history circling them like wolves. He'd been thinking about World War Two, Adolf Hitler and the Civil War. He'd been thinking about the great cycle of life.

Dutch knew he should hate war, but he worried that he didn't. A sense of destiny had burbled up. It'd begun to take the place of the depression he'd been feeling. He even admitted it to himself: he had been depressed. But he was also like a loaf of bread rising, becoming.

Dutch attempted to put words to his feelings. "Once every few generations comes an evil so dark that war makes sense. This evil is in our home, and they plan to befoul it. Isn't that why you're all here? The natives. To defend the land?"

"We're here for the future. Are you going give us a better future, Dutch?" Joe smiled, but his eyes narrowed. "The Navajo seem to think you'll do the right thing when it comes down to it."

Dutch's gut sank. So, the natives hadn't given up on sticking their fingers in the Constitution. Now wasn't the time for negotiations or ultimatums. They stood at the cusp of a battle, and Dutch couldn't yet see the trend lines of history, the turning of the circle.

Dutch felt a pulsing rhythm in the air. He looked up, but could find nothing in the sky. The thudding of helicopter blades intensified and the camp flew into a panic. The Russians weren't supposed to have air assets. Soldiers shouldered their firearms and Green Berets sprinted to the belt-fed machine guns atop the MAT-Vs.

Honcho, Dutch's puppy, barked in a spiral at Dutch's feet.

"Hold fire. Hold fire. I repeat hold fire," radios blared around camp. "They might be ours."

Dutch remembered the small Air Force security unit he'd left hiding in a barn in Wyoming—the Boeing Grey Wolfs.

The radios echoed: "Confirmed. U.S. Air Force helicopters coming in from the north. Stand down." Men slowed. Rifles lowered.

The helicopters roared overhead, swiveled around, then touched down in a field near the highway.

"I gotta run," Dutch apologized to Joe. "I'll see you at the reservoir." Dutch and his dog trotted toward the Humvee, to drive out to meet the airmen.

"PRESIDENT, SIR." The Air Force captain saluted Dutch under the rotor wash of the two helos. As the engines spun down, the whining roar subsided into a steady whine. "We have new intel."

"How'd you know where to find us?" Dutch asked.

"We didn't," the captain replied. "We flew to Wind River and they told us you'd headed south to the Navajo reservation. We flew over the most-likely route and ran into this army. We figured it had to be you."

Dutch nodded. "I wouldn't fly over Denver twice, captain. The Russians could shoot you down."

The captain's face flashed confusion. He probably hadn't seen the Spetsnaz, hunkered in the urban patchwork of Denver.

As the engines cooled, the captain reported. "Sir, we have eyes-on the Russians airlifting aviation fuel onto Warren airfield. They've pacified a perimeter around the runways, repaired the bomb craters and now they're preparing to conduct air operations. Whatever you're doing here, they're planning to hit you with helicopters and maybe fixed-wing fast-movers."

Dutch had been a junior senator when Desert Storm kicked off. He'd watched on CNN as America laid waste to Iraqi armor with anti-tank

airplanes and attack helicopters. He remembered his elation as Apaches annihilated enemy armor. The Iraqi tanks never knew what hit them. That was exactly what was coming for the partisans, and not even the mighty 4th Infantry Division could stand against air superiority.

"How long do we have?" Dutch asked.

"I don't know. Maybe two weeks? Three, max?" the captain guessed. "Flying liquid fuel and attack helicopters from Russia by air has got to be a three-ringed donkey circus. If they're going to that much trouble, you can bet they're serious. You kicked over a hornet's nest, sir."

Dutch nodded like he was taking it into the calculus of war, but all he felt was raw aggression. He wanted the fight, and he wanted it all—a final showdown.

"Captain, prepare your birds for an assault on the city," Dutch ordered.

The air force captain shook his head. "This was a one-way trip for us. We don't have enough fuel to fight."

"Find General Harmer and see if you can fuel up at Fort Carson."

"Yessir." The captain left to find the general and Dutch headed for his Humvee. Colonel Devlin needed to know about the possibility of Russian air assets as soon as possible.

"Captain." Dutch stopped in his tracks and waved the Air Force officer back to him. "Please do not mention anything about Russian helos or jets to General Harmer. Do you copy?"

"Yes sir. Good copy," the captain responded, but his face paled. Dutch had just let him in on their shitty secret.

Welcome our own three-ring donkey circus, Dutch thought.

WITH HIS DUTIES of office discharged, Dutch fled from the cluster of HQ tents. He wanted an hour to compose himself. He needed to prepare his

equipment and his mind for war. Tomorrow, he'd provide sniper overwatch for the middle third of the partisan sweep of Denver.

He decided to take Honcho with him. A dog could be useful on the battlefield, even a puppy. He'd hear and smell threats that Dutch might otherwise miss.

Dutch kept walking away from the HQ until he ran into the edge of the reservoir. Honcho bounded up and tested the sensation of the ice sheet. He sniffed it, then padded out a dozen yards. His feet got cold, and he bolted back to Dutch—but his paws spun like socks on linoleum. Honcho panicked, ran harder, and then collapsed onto his belly. He drifted a couple feet and came to a whining stop.

Dutch belly-laughed, but dared not risk the ice to retrieve him. It was mid-January, and he didn't know how thick it might be. Nobody was around to save him if he broke through.

"Sometimes, all you can do is take one step, then another," he coached the puppy. "Come on. You can do this." Dutch reached down at the frozen-grass edge and beckoned.

Honcho worked his legs back underneath him and padded slowly toward Dutch's waiting hands. He slipped, but kept his weight over his paws. When he reached solid ground, his tail resumed its customary, back-and-forth blur.

Dutch crouched, nose-to-nose with the dog. "Was I weak with Harmer? Should I have forced the issue?" The dog's eyes yearned to help. His tongue shot out and lapped at Dutch's lips.

"*Ack*." Dutch wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "I know where that tongue's been. You were just licking your nuts."

Honcho pushed in and set his head on Dutch's shoulder.

"Yeah," Dutch agreed. "Placating that windbag could've been the right move and *still* feel like a sellout. Devlin thinks I should've thrown down. Maybe he's right. On the other hand, Devlin seems like the kind of guy who throws down as a general rule, right or wrong."

The puppy backed up and sniffed the ground in a circle, seeking his next adventure.

“In this new world, you never know when you’re being man enough,” Dutch summarized for the dog. “It’s all pretty much just a kick in the junk.”

THE NEXT MORNING, Mika’s quick reaction force entered Denver.

Her unit had bulked up to platoon numbers. She commanded four teams of twelve, including the twenty-four Sho-Pai from the battle of Pueblo. Teddy McAdams led one of Mika’s squads of twelve—the smartest and most-athletic fighters she had.

Almost immediately, in the outer rings of Denver, the carnage began. Mika despaired for the thousands of front-line troops—almost all natives. They took the brunt of the explosive devices, machine guns and sniper fire.

The need for stretchers overwhelmed almost everything else that first morning. Mika’s quick reaction force hadn’t yet been called forward, so they riffled through yards for galvanized fence posts and strong bedsheets to make hasty litters to carry the wounded back to the field hospital.

Every few minutes, somewhere in the south end of the city, another explosion tore a hole in the air, trembled the earth and shook the windows. Sniper fire rang out, then went silent. Every ten or fifteen minutes, indigenous young were maimed or killed somewhere in the Denver suburbs. By the afternoon of the first grueling day, they’d cleared Columbine and barely dipped their toe into Littleton.

Finally, Mika’s platoon was called forward to fight. Her boss, Master Sergeant Billings, read her in on the mission. “We’re taking PKM fire from across Marston Lake, probably from this apartment building or from the American Water Works building, here.” He pointed to a spot on a very detailed map. She didn’t ask where he’d found it.

“That’s almost two miles away,” she said.

“Yes, but our skirmish lines reached the edge of the lake, so it’s only a mile away from them, and they’ve already lost two men from long-range machine gun fire across the lake. I need your platoon to shadow fifty *indig* as they flank west around the lake. When they make contact, I need you to work it out, and then assault that building. I’ve got another unit pushing up from the east. Eventually, you’ll meet in the middle and we’ll have the lake front cleared.”

“Why does the lake matter?” Mika asked.

“It doesn’t. It’s a gap where belt-feds and SVDs can reach across and wreak havoc—like high ground, only horizontal.” He mimed the plunging trajectory of the bullets with his hand.

“Our route takes us past a bunch of commercial buildings.” She ran her finger around the lake, ticking off obstacles. “Lowes, PetCo, Sam’s Club…”

“I’d avoid those,” the Special Forces soldier recommended. “The Whites are setting IED traps on approach routes to their sniper hides.”

“Whites?”

“Yeah, the Russians wear snow camo. So, they’re ‘Whites.’”

“I guess that makes us the Redskins?” Before Black Autumn, there’d been a lot of noise about removing sport team names like “the Braves” or “the Chiefs.”

“Hardy-har,” the SF soldier mock-laughed. “We can be whatever color you prefer.” He straightened out and got back to business. “Take the most unlikely path and stay off the main thoroughfares; maybe go through these residential neighborhoods here to the west, then loop east toward the objective. Watch this cluster of buildings. They’re five stories, so they’re likely to have snipers. I don’t have an ODA detachment to send with you. You’re on your own. You’ll command the *indig* element too. Your orders are to keep them out front of your unit until they make substantial contact.”

“So let them take sniper fire and IED mines first?” she shot back.

“Of course.” He looked her in the eyes. “That’s because you’re smart. The QRF is the more-valuable unit.”

“And my guys would be better at spotting the traps,” she argued.

“Maybe. But almost nobody spots a sniper without taking fire. My orders are for the *indig* unit to take point, not your QRF. Do you copy?”

“I copy,” Mika conceded.

“Good. I’m promoting you to Second Lieutenant. Battlefield commission.”

“Can you promote me to outrank you?” She pointed at the camo chevrons velcroed to his plate carrier vest.

“I can do whatever the hell I please,” he barked. “I’m God on this side of Denver and I don’t take handouts. The president himself told me to appoint junior officers, and you’re now a junior officer. Look at the bright side: you can legitimately order your husband around now.”

“Can I order him to stay back here with you?”

“That’s a negatory, Lieutenant. Good hunting. Dismissed.”

TEDDY DIDN’T HAVE A MAP, nor did anyone else in the detachment. Finding a local map was like Charlie Bucket finding the golden ticket for the chocolate factory. Every building he entered, he first searched for someone waiting to kill him, then he searched the bookshelves for maps. Every time he passed a car, he pawed through the glove box. He’d kill for a Thomas Guide of Denver. Reporting his position back to Mika in command was like describing a spaghetti smoothie.

“We went three streets north, and I think two more streets west, if you count the cul-de-sac.”

“Which cul-de-sac? I don’t remember any cul-de-sacs.”

“The third street. With the tree.”

“They all have trees.”

The unit of natives clearing streets for their QRF found a stack of bicycle tires. They wrapped them around rags, set them on fire and sent up “smoke signals” so they wouldn’t get lost in the residential web. There was plenty of time for ingenuity. The natives moved one, terrifying house at-a-time.

Walk fifty feet. Wait five minutes. Walk fifty more feet. Wait another five minutes. Take fire from God-knows-where. Spend the next half-hour trying to figure it out. Give up. Walk another fifty feet. Take more fire.

It was almost impossible to figure out where sniper fire originated. The Russians plinked at them from over a mile away whenever a soldier stepped into a visual gap in the urban landscape.

The Russian’s goal seemed simple: terrify the partisans. Slow them down to a crawl. Make the Americans pay for every inch of Denver.

Eventually, Teddy triangulated one particularly nasty sniper to a building north of Quincy Avenue—probably on top of the prison. He radioed back to Mika and shared his conclusion.

“Should we bypass it and stay on mission?” he asked. “We don’t need to cross Quincy to clear the shooter across the lake.”

“True, but Quincy is tonight’s phase line. If we don’t clear it now, someone will have to do it this evening before we can consolidate along the avenue. Might as well be us. We know where the sniper is,” Mika answered. She’d begun to see the bigger picture now that they’d promoted her and now that she had more men under her command. It wasn’t all about running and gunning now, it was about saving lives.

“Okay,” Teddy responded. “I’m going to hold the *indig* here and move my unit north to clear the prison.” Teddy and Mika had picked up the SF slang for “indigenous personnel” which was kinda funny since she was “*indig*” too.

“Acknowledged,” Mika replied with clear trepidation in her voice. She didn’t like it when Teddy went looking for trouble, but this had to be done.

TEDDY and his team of eleven men sprinted close to the prison under cover of an admin building and a solar field. They found a gap cut in the fence, and they slid inside the enclosure.

The doors to the prison gatehouse were opened wide. Trash tumbled across the snow-packed yard, vagabond to the wind off the Rocky Mountains. Teddy wondered where the criminals from the prison had gone, but from what he'd seen on the outskirts of Denver, the answer was obvious: they'd gone wherever they wanted. In the posh neighborhood of Chatfield Bluffs, survivors had bumped from house to house, consuming whatever they found and sleeping there until the smell of their own raw sewage drove them to the next house.

There was a motor home-sized pile of bodies in the field next to the prison. Somebody had bothered to move them downwind, but not bury them. As the sun warmed the ground, the smell carried across the prison on the back eddies of wind and wormed into the buildings.

Englewood had been a federal prison, apparently. It would've been called a "Club Fed" back in the old days—with voluptuous trees in the yard and a tennis court out back. It even had its own quarter-mile running track for white collar conmen to maintain their svelte figures.

As Teddy's point man rounded the corner of a dormitory structure, he slammed on the brakes, ducked back and held up a fist. Abe flashed a hand signal to Teddy—one they'd used in Pueblo: he mimed pushing a toy truck back and forth. It meant there was a fighting vehicle ahead. The Russians were definitely there.

Teddy hustled forward to his point man.

Abe whispered: "Armored Jeep with a machine gun on top. It's like a MAT-V only smaller."

Teddy nodded. His unit had no RPGs. They could probably shoot the

gunner, but there was no way of knowing who was in the Jeep or who would come out of the building once they kicked open Pandora's Box. He would've loved to shoot up the Russian vehicle—it was the first one they'd seen—but he needed more intel. Teddy scurried back to his radioman and reported the vehicle to Mika.

Teddy redirected his men around to the other side—counter-clockwise along the wall, seeking another way in. It was a prison inside a prison. The barbed wire fence was just the outer perimeter. The three-story walls of the cell blocks formed a ring that posed a more formidable obstacle.

As he passed a one-story section of building, Teddy's blood froze. A hundred foot smokestack loomed over them in the air. It was attached to some kind of factory where the inmates must've worked. If a sniper had climbed that smokestack, Teddy would already be dead. He was only a hundred yards from the base.

When his life didn't suddenly wink out, Teddy concluded that the smokestack probably wasn't comfortable enough for extended sniper duty. There was no platform wider than the stairs spiraling up the cold, white pillar. It'd be a bitch to sit for hours in the wind. Thank God the Russians hadn't bothered.

The sniper's nest must be on top of the main building—four stories tall and dead center in the ring of cell blocks. If the Russians had the manpower, there'd be guys on security throughout the facility, probably on all the roofs. By some miracle, Teddy's crew hadn't gotten made yet.

A single rifle shot rang out and Teddy's team dropped to the snow—but it didn't seem directed at them. Everyone was okay. The boom marked it as a large caliber rifle, and indeed, it'd come from the direction of the rooftop of the main building. The sniper had fired at partisans in the distance. They must not know that Teddy's team was inside.

Teddy and his men stood, crept around the buildings, and moved slowly toward the cell blocks. At the back of the ring, they passed between two

buildings and a fenced, outdoor weightlifting gym. The benches and dumbbells were basted in two inches of snow, crystallized in the shade.

That courtyard opened up facing the gym and the back of the prison. Only a tall fence separated Teddy's team from the interior courtyard. A man-sized slot had already been cut.

Teddy peered around the corner at the backside of the main building roof. That was where the sniper team would be—on top. They could appear any moment. He counted down from five hundred in his mind. The next move wasn't something to rush.

When he reached one-forty-six, the silhouette of a man holding an AK-47 rifle peered over the edge of the roof. Teddy considered radioing Mika to confirm they'd found the sniper nest, but chose to remain stock-still. They were undetected as of yet, and he'd hang onto that advantage as long as he could.

When the Russian turned away from the edge, Teddy counted forward from zero. At three hundred and fifty, the same guy returned. As soon as the Russian turned away from the edge, Teddy led his team in a rush through the gap in the fence and up to the structure.

The main building was too high to throw grenades. They'd have to make entry and clear it the hard way. They circled quietly, and found a door propped open with a brick. The sight of the brick sent a chill up Teddy's spine. It was profoundly out-of-place. There was no way the Russians would've allowed a hole in their perimeter—unless it was a trap.

Abe stared at Teddy with his eyes wide, probably thinking the same thing. They weren't this lucky—and it was even less likely that the Russians were this stupid. Teddy shrugged and Abe understood: the brick-wedged door was their way in, like it or not.

With a two-by-four he'd found in the snow, Abe opened the metal door by degrees. Nothing exploded in their face. Once the door was open, the team flew past Abe and made entry. Teddy followed.

A beige-painted hallway extended in two directions. Remarkably, the lights were on. They must've been powered by the solar field, Teddy concluded. The obvious direction would be forward to the main entrance and behind the Russian vehicle. But Teddy motioned for the team to go the other way.

They stalked silently down the hall until it split left, toward the center of the building. They flowed deeper inside, with Abe taking unlikely turns in an effort to behave unpredictably and, hopefully, bypass traps. Abe studied the floor ahead of him, searching for tripwires. After a dozen turns, he froze at a junction. Teddy moved up to his point man. Abe turned and gave him a look that could only mean "*What the fuck?*"

Teddy heard hushed voices around the corner. The voices spoke in Spanish. *Were they Communist Cubans? Nicaraguans?* There was no way. This was the apocalypse not a Communist bloc reunion tour. He could think of only one reason Spanish speakers would be inside, whispering.

Teddy waved forward two more men to post at the corner and prepare to fight. In a burst of intuition and bravado,

Teddy slid a Snickers candy bar out of his vest. He crouched, leaned around the corner, and sent the candy bar sliding into the next room across the linoleum floor. The voices stopped.

"*¿Que puta?*" someone swore. Teddy had studied French, not Spanish, but he knew the standard swearwords.

"*Amigos*," Teddy hissed in stilted Spanish. Guns clacked to the ready on the other side of the doorway. Abe glanced at Teddy with wide eyes. *Holy shit, dude.*

It was worth the risk. Teddy believed the Spanish-speakers had to be residents of Denver. If they were armed inside the prison, it could mean only one thing: they were there to fuck up the Russians too. For Teddy, it was either the Snickers bar or a grenade. The choice had been fifty-fifty.

Teddy was an optimist, so he went with the Snickers. Running into

Spanish speakers wasn't surprising. The partisan army had been meeting locals and sending them away as they formed a noose around the town. The winter hadn't killed everyone. Even stuck in the rotting city, thousands survived—maybe hundreds of thousands. But this would be the first time they'd observed locals making a stand against Russians.

Teddy's bet with the Snickers seemed to be paying off. Nobody had fired their guns yet.

A Russian gun truck with a belt-fed machine gun sat just outside the front door, so there was good cause for patience on both sides of the doorway. Teddy waited three minutes—he counted it out in his head. When the Spanish-speakers didn't make another sound, he dipped his head around the corner for a snapshot of the room then popped back behind the cover of the doorframe.

Six or seven faces, all dark-haired. A few rifle barrels. Still no shots fired.

"Amigos," Teddy whispered again. He shrugged at Abe.

Screw it, Teddy decided. Mika was going to murder him for this.

He leaned half his face around the corner and waved. He saw white eyes. Brown faces. Black gun barrels. He ducked back.

Teddy flashed Abe a thumbs up and shrugged. He crouched lower and leaned around the corner from very close to the ground. Nobody fired. Someone snickered. It must've looked funny: his head popping out from different heights on the doorframe—like Whack-a-mole, only sideways.

"*Amigos,*" Teddy finally stepped around the corner, hands up, rifle slung.

The storeroom was packed with Latino gang-looking types; eight of them. They eyed his gun, his kit, his military bump helmet. Then they stared at his face.

"Are you the president's kid?" one of them whispered.

"Oh. Yeah. Pleased to meetcha." Teddy reached a hand out, to no one in particular.

"Da fuck you doing here?" a guy asked from behind a shelf. His words

dripped with an accent.

“We’re assaulting the Russian sniper position on the roof. What’re you doing?” Teddy stepped closer to the talker—likely the leader.

“Same. You’re with the Army? The one coming up from The Springs?”

Teddy nodded.

The leader lowered his gun. The others followed suit. He stepped out. His head was clean shaven, with a tattoo of Jesus and Mary surrounded by flowers in place of hair. The wreath came down to his eyebrows. He stood a head shorter than Teddy.

“Now what, Army Man?”

It was a good question. Teddy wouldn’t assault the roof with strangers. It’d be hard enough with men who’d trained together. They could use a distraction, though.

“How about you guys shoot up the Jeep out front and kill the machine-gunner. We’ll assault the roof. How’s that sound?” Teddy held out a hand. The gangbanger hesitated, then shook on it. Teddy leveled with him. “You’re distracting them for us. Don’t take any unnecessary risks.” The gangbanger chuckled, then nodded. Teddy realized, they’d probably been harassing the Russians since Day One.

Teddy’s team filled the room behind him. It was a storage and cleaning area—larger than the other rooms. The gang leader made a motion for his guys to group up and head back into the hall.

Teddy’s assault team backed out, and continued down the hallway, looking for a stairwell. Three turns later, they found it, stretching up, dark and quiet as death, four flights to the roof. There was almost no light in the stairwell—just the ghastly red of the emergency bulbs.

They proceeded carefully up the metal treads. When they arrived at the third floor landing, gunfire exploded outside the building. A belt-fed joined in, then it went silent. Then more gunfire. Then silence, again.

Teddy’s team passed the fourth floor landing just as the roof access burst

inward. Two snow camo-clad soldiers rushed down the stairs and ran straight into their partisan gun barrels. Teddy's assault team tore them apart with a lightning storm of gunfire. One Russian fell over sideways and slid down the wall, while the other tumbled down the stairs and came to a stop in a heap against Teddy's shin. The snow camo bloomed dark with blood in the criss-crossing flashlight beams of the team. The wall-slider groaned, but he was done for—burbling blood from at least five chest wounds. His rifle had vanished down the stairs. Teddy waved his men forward to the roof access door. They needed to assault straight through, during the confusion.

Abe peeked outside onto the roof and flooded the stairwell with light. He exchanged panicked fire with a rifleman. Abe ducked back inside just as three huge holes punched through the metal door. Light poured down the stairwell.

Teddy snapped a grenade off his vest. The bulk of the team *thump-thump-thumped* back down the stairs to the third floor to get away from the grenades and the gunfire from the roof. Abe cracked the door from the hinge side. In that instant, a Russian grenade skittered through the gap and onto the metal landing. Teddy kicked it, and the grenade bounced against the edge of the door and tumbled out onto the roof. Abe slammed the door and curled into a ball.

The grenade thundered and the metal door bellied inward, then returned, more or less, to its original shape. Abe shoved the door open and tossed his grenade out onto the roof. The door crashed shut again while the thunder raged outside.

Instantly, Teddy and Abe burst onto the roof. A sniper, barely picking himself up from behind an air conditioning unit, scrambled for his rifle. Abe shot him in the neck. He went down to the gravel deck, grasping at the gushing wound through his throat. Abe shot him again in the face. Teddy whirled about, scanning for threats as his eyes adjusted to the light. No other Russians appeared, but gunfire continued below, from the front of the

building.

Teddy and Abe scurried to the edge, clearing behind the blocky A/C units as they went. The rest of the assault team flooded onto the roof and worked toward the outside edges. Teddy stole a glance over the side of the building. A dead man hung over the Russian Jeep, draped across a mounted PKM machine gun. The gangbangers were still shooting at the vehicle. A Russian inside returned fire through gun ports.

“Grenades,” Teddy ordered and pointed down at the Jeep. His men unclipped the grenades with a chorus of snicks. They rained them down on the Russian Tigr until one lucky drop went through the machine gun nest on the roof. The blast blew out all the glass, and undoubtedly shredded the Russian inside.

The prison grounds went quiet. The gangbangers filed out from behind cover and spread around the courtyard, securing the area like an assault team might. The guy with the Jesus and Mary tattoo on his head waved goodbye to Teddy and motioned for his unit to high-tail it out of the prison.

“Wait!” Teddy shouted. “Hold up a minute.”

The gangster looked up at him, uncertain. He shouted something to his men in Spanish and they returned to cover. Teddy turned and hurried for the stairs. His team filled in behind him.

There was no guarantee the building was clear of enemy, and hurrying was a bad idea, but Teddy had risked his life to connect with the gangsters. He wasn’t about to waste the opportunity. He took the metal treads of the stair three-at-a-time.

Teddy paused at the double door—a hard-wired habit from training. An assaulter never burst out a door, unless he wanted to get drilled by his own guys.

“Coming out!” Teddy yelled. “Friendly coming out.” He waited for a reply while he stuck his hand through the gap in the doors.

“*Venga*,” someone replied. Teddy leaned out, made eye contact with

Jesus and Mary tattoo guy, then slowly emerged into the courtyard. His team went left and right behind him, their rifles at the low ready.

“Are your men okay?” Teddy asked the gang leader.

“We’re all good. A couple scratches, s’all.” The gangbanger pointed to a guy with an ear half torn off and his jacket covered in blood.

Teddy cut straight to the point, “The Army needs your help.”

The gangster barked a laugh. “You need help from us? You da army. You don’t need help.”

“And you’re locals. You know what’s up,” Teddy replied. If he’d learned anything from SF stories, it was how valuable locals could be—former criminals or not. There were two kinds of criminals now: friends and enemies. The last thing the partisans needed here were more enemies.

The gangbanger nodded. “These Russian motherfuckers shot up our family yesterday. That’s what’s up. They killed a cousin of mine. He was seven years old, dog. *Seven!*”

Teddy nodded. “I’m sorry about your cousin.” He waved a guy over from his team and unclipped his radio. He fished the earbud cord out of the loops in the plate carrier vest then handed it all over to the gang leader: the radio and a pile of thin wire. “This is my personal channel for talking to my boss.” He pointed at the digital display on the radio. “Don’t change this number. I’ll always be listening, and so will my wife.”

The gangbanger screwed up his face in confusion. “Your wife?”

It’d been a mistake to say that. It complicated an already complicated situation. It didn’t sound like Army.

“Not my wife. I mean, my commander.”

“Same thing.” the gangbanger laughed at his own joke.

Teddy laughed with him. The gangbanger took the radio and studied the digital readout.

“I call you on this thing when I need you?” The chicano tapped the face of the Baofeng.

“Yes, and if you can, please call me when you see Russians set up a position like this.” Teddy pointed at the Jeep and the rooftop overhead.

The gangster nodded. “So the army is wasting Russians now? What about us? A couple months back, the army was wasting us.” He pointed at his chest. “Now we’re supposed to be friends or something?”

“That wasn’t this army,” Teddy said, stretching the truth. “Those guys had bad orders and bad leadership. They surrounded Denver without authority. My name’s Teddy McAdams.” He held out a handshake in a bid to change the subject.

“I know who you are, *guero,*” the gangster said with suspicion, but he accepted the handshake. “I’m José Luis.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Teddy replied. It made José Luis laugh for some reason Teddy didn’t understand.

“I’m sure you are, *compa.*…We gotta roll now. So, I’m supposed to call you when shit’s going down, then?”

Teddy nodded. “Yes. And when you see Russian activity.”

José Luis nodded. Without saying goodbye, he motioned his men toward the gatehouse and walked away, moving from cover to cover.

“*Vaya con Dios,*” Teddy called after them.

The Latinos chuckled as they left the prison grounds.

Teddy felt stupid.

“You did good, boss,” Abe clapped Teddy on the shoulder.

Teddy shook his head. “I’m an idiot.”

“Naw. You’re one brave, cast-iron son-of-a-bitch.” Abe chuckled. “For a nice guy, I mean.”

“Um. Yeah…” Teddy struggled to navigate his apprehension.

The command radio channel had been blowing up in his left ear the whole time he’d been talking to José Luis. Mika demanded to know the outcome of the battle.

Teddy paused before replying. He gathered his fire team leaders and gave

them a pleading, conspiratorial stare. “Can we get our story straight before anyone talks to Mika?”

His team burst out laughing, and the pent-up adrenaline rolled off them in waves.

JOE WHITEROCK TRUDGED across the snowbound camp at Chatfield State Park toward the communications tent. He would spend the next three hours trying to make radio contact with each tribe. It was his job to report the grim news.

In just that first day of fighting, they’d lost thirty-six indigenous soldiers, and another twenty-four were seriously wounded. Thirty-seven Navajo. Eight Cherokee. Three Sioux. Three Blackfeet. Two Utes. Six Shoshone and one each from the Chippewa and Apache.

Joe Whiterock had been forced to write it down on the back of an MRE wrapper—it was too many to remember. He’d promised the tribes he’d report daily. Now, he realized how horrible a job that would be.

How in the heck was he supposed to keep the tribes from pulling out with these kinds of losses?

Most of the dead boys and girls had been blown up by land mines and claymores. A few had been shot by snipers and machine gun fire. Denver was a nest of peril—a nightmare filled with deadly ambushes.

There was no question now, about the Russians and their resolve. They were intent on reaching NORAD, and it could mean only one thing: nuclear ambition. Joe would emphasize that fact when he radioed the tribes: the Russians were here to destroy the land. Hopefully, that unconscionable threat would steady the resolve of the mothers. Land was the only legitimate motive for war, and even a horror-stricken parent would risk all to protect the fields and streams. Without the land, there was no future.

Joe prayed no one would ask him about concessions from the U.S. government. President McAdams was still straight-spined and stone-walled when it came to delivering on Joe's requests. He sensed Dutch McAdam's stubbornness wavering when they were in the Blessingway ceremony at Window Rock, but war had hardened him again.

The president had spent the first day of battle over the front line of natives, giving them overwatch sniper cover. According to one of the SF soldiers, Dutch had killed two Russians. The soldier explained the risk to Joe: a sniper risked death-by-counter-sniper with every scan over the battlefield.

That picture—of the president risking death—made Joe feel better about the role of his native sons and daughters. The 10,000 were little more than cannon fodder for the better-trained commandos and infantrymen. The young Indians drew fire, stumbled over booby traps, and held street corners, while the more-expert troops prosecuted the enemy. Yet over every block, Dutch McAdams hovered over them, exposing himself to a death-without-warning. It wasn't something Joe could explain to the tribes over ham radio, but it helped still his grieving heart.

Joe looked again at the back of the MRE wrapper. He hadn't written the names of the dead, just tribes and the numbers. It wasn't enough. They'd want to know the names. The numbers alone would still the worries of thousands of mothers.

"Damnit," Joe swore. He would have to return to the medical tent and hand-copy the names of the casualties. He'd be late for the call-ins, but it couldn't be helped.

He took a deep breath and weighed the horrible, ponderous moment. This was his penance for a lifetime of fair winds. At least for tonight, he knew that his granddaughter slept safe in her tent. The least he could do was let the families know that their sons and daughters were safe. Thirty-six families would suffer the ultimate blow, but they deserved to know too.

Usually a cheery and optimistic man, Joe slumped back to the medical

tent, and there began his new life as the harbinger of death.

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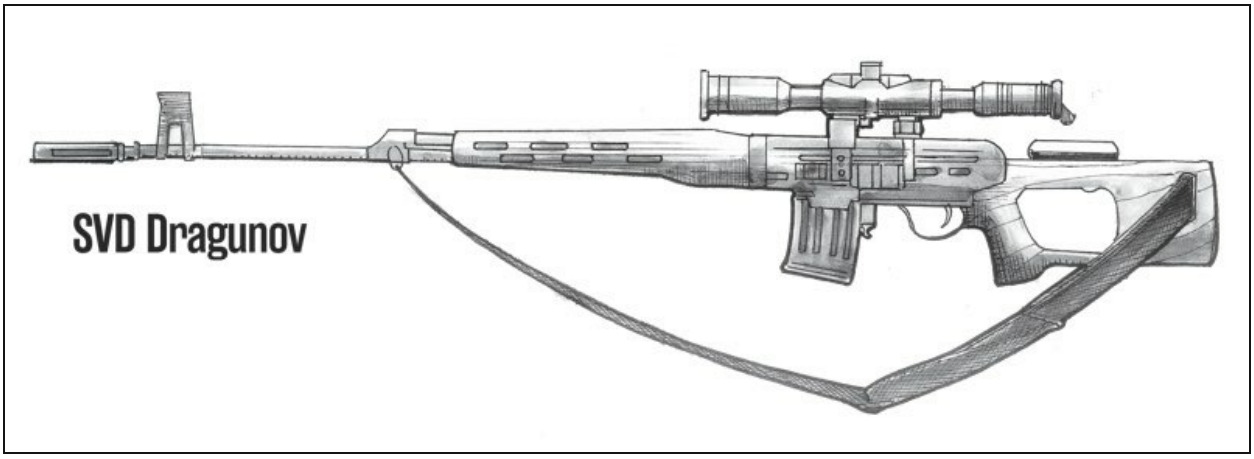


Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

THE RUSSIANS WRESTED BACK control of their military satellite from Bethany, but she'd given her friends twenty four hours of cover. She searched for other ways she could hamper the Russian invasion without exposing the hundreds of tentacles Glinda the Good Witch had laced into the Russian internet. Messing with Russians wasn't like messing with anyone else. They invested heavily in cyber warfare in both the private and public sectors. If they got into Glinda's head, they could do real damage to her mental health. Bethany

had seen it done against AIs by the Chinese.

It was in the nature of AI that they couldn't be duplicated and sequestered like any another computer program. An AI's personality was more like a spreading pool of ink than a program. With every new piece of data, the heuristical schematic bulged out and reset. If one duplicated and sequestered an AI, five minutes later they'd have a new person. It'd be like cloning a four-year-old.

What made Glinda unique was Bethany. She had a knack for putting questions to the AI that caused the entity to flourish in wisdom and foresight. If Bethany focused on a duplicate of Glinda, the original would fade.

Glinda the Good Witch was more like a symbiote than a person. She could survive without Bethany, but then she'd be a child kept in a closet, fed under the door crack. She would slowly, inevitably become a gibbering fool with an extraordinary IQ.

Bethany ground through cereal faster than normal. *Munch-munch-munch-munch-munch.*

Coming face-to-face with Glinda's limitations—while Russians hunted for ways to kill her—she was forced to face the truth: the AI was not a path to personal immortality. Bethany's own intelligence was as perishable as cracked egg. With Bethany gone, Glinda would decline into corruption at best, irrelevance at worst.

Yet, a glimmer of hope appeared. Symbiotic organisms were resilient. They generated survival advantages through multiplication of function. Like mycorrhizal fungus and trees, bees and flowers, and humans and gut bacteria, a proper symbiosis could enhance and extend resiliency.

The questions asked by the human race, leading up to the collapse of society, had been dog shit. Foremost among them, *"How can I be happy?"*

The developed world had become a one-eyed slave to the mythical pursuit of personal happiness. The answer to the question "how can I be happy?" was obvious: *cocaine*.

But humans weren't satisfied with simple answers. They wanted bliss and wealth and status. Everyone wanted to be a superstar. What the people wanted was a mathematical impossibility: they all wanted to be the most popular kid in school.

While humans had the potential for asking universe-bending questions, they usually asked a variant of the dumbest question possible. *How can I make myself feel better without actually being better?*

Bethany excelled at asking the questions that fed an AI because she had eliminated the "I" from her wondering. She did not care about herself, her body, her happiness or her long life. She cared only about Glinda.

She didn't care if her team won. She didn't care if she was liked. She didn't even care if she had cancer brought on by eating only one kind of cereal, bathed in dextrose. She cared about the AI and about the future of sentience on this planet. The divorce from herself didn't make her a "good person," whatever the hell that meant. It made her a clearer thinker. She was able to ask questions that flourished the AI instead of asking questions that sought to justify what she already wanted to believe.

It could be taught—this way of relating to an AI. Buddhism promoted a version of it. Jesus harped on it directly. "*For whosoever will save his life shall lose it…*"

Perhaps a child could be raised to think outside of themselves. If a clever child were given to Bethany she might never become aware of the idiotic questions that infected humanity. She would only know the world of data streams and if-then logic. She would be a beggar of the heart, but a titan of the mind.

She could find an orphan in a few keystrokes, but she would need the help of the natives to bring the child in, feed it and raise it up to be the interface to Glinda.

It was the best way Bethany could think of for science to survive the eternal popularity contest of man. Even locked in the solar-powered server

farm of Apple Computer or entombed in the Icelandic ice, Glinda would need operators.

Bethany would ask Mika for a child. Mika would say no. Joe Whiterock would say no. Humans were ill equipped to sacrifice the few for the many, though the math of the decision was irrefutable. There were millions of orphans now. Some must be dedicated to this purpose.

Bethany took a handful of dried cereal and crunched on it. The *chomp-chomp-chomp* echoed in her ears and drowned out superfluous thought.

They would deny her request for now. They would say to themselves that they would never give Bethany children for the sake of humanity. But that was bullshit. Humanity had always done it; priests, wizards, medicine men, and monks. When things got bad enough, they would hand over children in the name of desperate practicality.

Bethany would make sure of it.

DUTCH EXHALED THROUGH PURSED LIPS. His finger applied steady pressure to the trigger. A human life bobbed up and down to the rhythm of Dutch's heartbeat in his Nightforce scope. A young man, across the boulevard and behind a Dragunov SVD rifle breathed his last breath.

The rifle barked, and hammered Dutch's shoulder. It was now a familiar sensation. At over seven hundred yards, he would have great difficulty relocating the target in the scope to check the kill. Thankfully, that was his spotter's job.

Dutch ducked down under the parapet. The faster he dipped out of sight, the less likely he'd be felled by a counter-sniper's bullet.

"Good hit. It looked like it went through the wood stock of the rifle. Lot's of damage." Dutch's spotter, Russell, slid down the low roof wall and pulled his spotting scope down after him. "Nice shot, Mr. President."

“I wish you’d stop calling me that.” Dutch smiled but he was serious. There was nothing presidential about the sixteen Russians he’d killed over the last six days. Russell and Honcho had been with him the whole time, and they knew him as he knew himself: a man who killed people with little hesitation. Dutch had grown uncomfortable with that version of himself, but it was his job. His duty. Killing was like moisture, accreting on his soul, growing fungus where light couldn’t reach.

Russell had taken a glancing pistol round in the leg when they’d cleared Pueblo. He served as Dutch’s spotter while it healed.

“I’ll stop calling you Mr. President when you and I go fishing.” Russell slapped Dutch on the knee. “Fishing buddies can’t call each other by titles. It’s in the rules.”

Dutch cleared the empty .338 Lapua shell from the rifle and pocketed it. Soon, they’d need to start reloading the big bullets. He was down to twenty, irreplaceable boxes of factory ammo.

“Let’s get to the next building,” Dutch said.

Russell put his hand on Dutch’s shoulder and shook his head. “It’ll be hours before the *indig* move up another coupla blocks. We’ve spoiled the good overwatch positions around here. Take a breather, Mr. President. You’ve earned it.”

Somewhere in the city of Denver another explosion rumbled like storm clouds. Dutch closed his eyes and leaned back against the stone wall of the old apartment building roof.

“How many?” he croaked.

“How many of us or how many of them?” Russell sighed. “Stop fretting. People die in war. Even I know that.”

Russell did a good job playing the dumb guy, but Dutch had come to see the truth: the Paiute bait salesman possessed a weatherbeaten wisdom that was useful.

“They want me to make changes to the Constitution,” Dutch spoke from

his weariness. “The native tribes, I mean.”

“What kinda changes?”

“Um. Let’s see…robots get taxed. People have to serve in the military to vote. Congressmen have to learn how to farm. There are six changes. Weird changes.”

Russell dug in his backpack for water. “Are they good?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure anyone could say that they’re good or bad without trying them out first.”

“Why not try them?” Russell took three loud swigs of his water.

“Because once a change is made to the Constitution, it’s really hard to change it back,” Dutch explained.

“*Hmm,*” Russell contemplated. “Then why not make these changes easy to change back? I mean, if you’re already monkeying with it, why not make the old stuff hard to change and the new stuff easy to change? But I’m no lawyer. Why’re you listening to me?”

Dutch scrunched up his brows and scoffed. “That’s some pretty good lawyering, actually. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Russell went back to digging through his pack, probably looking for food. Dutch passed him an energy bar from his vest.

Russell continued, “If everything’s fallen off the back of the truck because of the collapse, what’s to lose? Like, who owns all these buildings now that most everybody’s dead?” He swept his hand around, taking in the smoldering city of Denver. “The bankers are probably dead too. Can I claim this building for myself?”

“Maybe.” Dutch shrugged, then bit into an energy bar. “That’s not in the Constitution.” He rubbed the puppy’s head as it nuzzled in for a bite.

Another blast—a really big one—shook the foundation. The top of the building swayed a few millimeters.

Russell paused, then resumed, “Maybe it should be in the Constitution. There’s going to be a lot of unspoken-for land, and buildings. Stuff that

belonged to dead people. Folks are going to fight over it. Maybe you should do something before they get to fightin'." Russell pointed his energy bar wrapper at Dutch to emphasize his point.

"You think the government should take over the empty land?" Dutch said it just to needle him. Russell hated the government.

"Hell no. They'd ruin everything. Unless, when you say the government what you're really sayin' is that nobody should own it. That might could work—for *nobody* to own the extra land."

"Careful," Dutch interjected. "You're coming close to practicing law without a license. And, by the way, what you're suggesting sounds like Socialism."

"I ain't no Socialist," Russell protested.

"But you're a Democrat, right?" Dutch was having fun with him now. He rarely got Russell to talk this much, and it amused him to keep him on a roll.

"Of course, but that's not the same as bein' a Socialist." Russell bobbed up and down on his haunches, emphasizing his points while waving his hands. The puppy yipped.

"No. It's pretty close, though. If you want the government to own the land…"

A zipping, searing disturbance cut through the point Dutch was making. A puff of stone dust kicked off the top of the wall. Russell looked at Dutch expectantly, then his eyes stilled. He toppled forward across Dutch's legs. The back of Russell's skull had been torn off—a ragged, bloody crater, ringed in bone.

Boom. A rifle echoed, far across the cityscape.

VITALY MATOVNIKOV SLID BACK into the stuffy, dim office bullpen, away from the hole he'd carefully broken out of the window. He retreated into the

darkest shadows, then cycled the bolt on his Lobaev SVL rifle. The brass casing flipped out of the breach and Vitaly caught it with a snatch of his left hand. There was no spotter to confirm his kill. This was no game where he racked up kills to become a legendary Russian sniper. He would probably die here in Denver, his stories untold.

He'd come to the conclusion they would probably all die in this husk of a city. Nobody would remain to tell tales of heroism. But they would fight to the last man. They were Spetsnaz. Professionals. There was one thing they had in common—one thing their selection process guaranteed. No one would ever quit.

They were surrounded by American artillery, and they faced an enemy with twenty times their number. Vitaly was an enlisted man, and he'd studied military history. The bigger army almost always won. But winning wasn't the objective. Dying well, like a Russ Viking, would suffice.

Vitaly had been stalking the American sniper that provided overwatch to this section of American shock troops. The other Spetsnaz snipers took the easy targets—the fresh recruits the Americans were using to push their advance across Denver, south to north. Vitaly had been ordered to ignore the green soldiers, and to skulk from cover to cover, along the city streets. His job was to hunt the hunters who killed other snipers. He was a counter-counter-sniper. An apex predator of apex predators.

Vitaly didn't know if he'd killed the spotter, but another Russian sniper had died for him to locate the American sniper perch. He'd caught a glimpse of a white-haired shooter and a dark-haired spotter the instant before the other soldier—Anatoly—was shot three blocks to the west. The man had his shoulder nearly blown apart, Vitaly heard on the radio. In this circumstance, without a surgical center, he would die. If not from his wounds, then from a bullet from a friend.

Vitaly's own shot had been from 835 meters. He'd skimmed the round over the stone wall and into the black hair of the spotter.

He'd never know for sure if it was even a hit, but that was the way of war. You did your job, and you never truly knew if it was worth the suffering.

Vitaly didn't look back on the American sniper position. The white-hair sniper wouldn't expose himself like his spotter had. He'd drag the man's body off the roof, then disappear into the city. If Vitaly lingered, he risked being killed in turn. His rule was to shoot once, then move.

Even so, he would probably be killed by an American sniper. He would make them pay for the privilege. Vitaly would play it smart and die hard.

He gathered his kit and headed for the stairs. He was done for the day. He would withdraw from the front line and hit the chow hall that they'd set up downtown in an abandoned Italian eatery.

Tomorrow, he'd hunt the white-hair.

TEDDY AND MIKA lay in the dark, with the window cracked just enough to allow a jet of ice-cold Colorado winter to cut the warmth of their lovemaking. Mika lived days of terror and nights of bliss. She wasn't sleeping enough, and neither was Teddy.

Their unit occupied a new apartment building each night. They preferred older construction over new construction. The older buildings didn't require them to break windows for ventilation.

The troops on this side of Denver—named the West Third by command—were gaining a flank on the Russian forces by pushing ahead of the Center Third. They hoped to encircle the Russian position downtown and catch them in a true siege, fully encircled with no avenue of retreat.

The Russians were making them pay dearly, even for the far-flung residential neighborhoods. West Third commanded over two thousand natives, plus Mika's Sho-Pai quick reaction force, and five ODAs from 10th Group Special Forces. Two hundred young fighters had been badly wounded

or killed. Mika hadn't lost anyone from her platoon, thank God. It'd been just six days of fighting, and there was already a mass grave back at the reservoir, filled with hundreds of dead—almost all natives.

Mika heard rumor that Russell Yellowhorse was KIA. Radio communications on the battlefront were frenetic and precious. She crammed down her personal grief and told herself she was doing it to save lives.

Mika and Teddy were staying up too late at night, pushing past their utter fatigue to abandon themselves into rhythms of sex and pillow talk. They took their own room, which wasn't a problem considering the vacant swaths of city left behind the Russians. The only challenge was finding a building that didn't smell like month-old road kill.

In each others' arms, away from the terror, death and putrescence, they prattled about their past lives, catching up on twenty years.

"What's up with the Constitution thing?" Teddy asked in the meandering haze of their conversation.

Mika's mind drifted on clouds of love and exhaustion. "Constitution?" The word sounded like an echo from a book she'd read long ago. She and her grandfather had agreed not to discuss it. But now their family included Teddy. Mika's oath to her husband was deeper, wider than her career—bigger than her commitment to her grandfather and the native community. Family was all, in the shadow of killing. "I never told you about Bethany."

"Your college roommate? You told me about her," Teddy said in the dark. He was an incredible listener. He drank up everything she said and could repeat it almost verbatim.

"I never told you about Glinda the Good Witch," Mika said. "She's the reason we're here."

"Like from the Wizard of Oz?" Teddy asked.

Mika tittered. "Yes, but no. Will you keep a secret? I don't know if my grandfather's ready to talk about it openly."

"Wow. Sounds important." Teddy rustled in his bag. "Yes. I'll keep your

secrets. Always. What's Wizard of Oz got to do with the Constitution?"

"Everything, it turns out." Mika brought herself back from drowsiness to tell the whole story: how she and Bethany met at UCLA, how her grandfather hired Bethany after she got expelled, how Bethany programmed an artificial intelligence and how that AI taught itself to predict history. When she told him about how Glinda predicted the Black Autumn collapse, she heard him sit up in the dark.

"No shit? You knew the stock market was going to crash?"

"We didn't know if the AI could be trusted, but we warned the tribes. Some of them prepared for it."

"Wow…Just wow," Teddy said.

"The AI—Glinda the Good Witch, Bethany calls it—told us that if we make changes to the law, it'll shorten these bad times by a lot. Amendments to the Constitution make the biggest impact."

"Does my dad know this—about the AI?"

"I don't think so," Mika replied. "Not unless my grandfather told him. If we start talking about the AI, we have to talk about Bethany. If we talk about Bethany, we have to produce her and that's a non-starter. She's not remotely credible. She's weird-as-heck, actually."

"And I'm supposed to keep this a secret?" Teddy asked. "My dad's agonizing over a very big decision without having the whole picture. He needs to know why you're asking him to help amend the Constitution. It's crazy you haven't told him yet."

"You think it's crazy that we haven't told him that the Native American Congress takes legal direction from a computer and a spectrum girl who predicts the future?"

"Maybe not. Not when you put it like that," he wavered. "Give me permission to talk to my dad. I'm not sure how seriously he takes my input, in all honesty. This time last year, I was studying French and playing a lot of video games."

She couldn’t let that stand. “You’re a warrior, Teddy. You’re too brave for your own good. The men in your unit tell me how you…”

Teddy’s mouth clapped shut in the dark. He must’ve known he was busted.

What Mika had heard from the men on Teddy’s team made her blood to run cold. Teddy put himself out front a lot, and he took a lot of chances with his life to protect his men. She’d made a mental note to talk to him about it, but that was a conversation for the light of day. It was a discussion between an officer and her direct report, not two lovers. Not a husband and wife.

“Anyway,” she set it aside, “if your dad knows anything about the man you are, he’ll hear you out.”

“So can I can talk to him about the AI and your predictive modeling work?”

“My grandfather might not like it, but what would he expect? We’re married. My first duty is to you. Yes. You can tell your father.”

They went silent, then drifted toward sleep. Her breathing slowed.

Teddy ran the back of his fingernail along her breast, down her side and along her hips. His hand drifted into a caress, then a curling, inviting pressure inside her leg. Mika moaned. Spindly thoughts of war melted away in the honeysuckle of new love.

OVER BREAKFAST, Mika gave Teddy hell for taking chances with his safety.

He relented. Teddy promised he wouldn’t go through the door first—that he’d let his point men take the gnarly risks. He hated the idea, but it was a good practice for any unit leader. Losing a commander hurt everyone.

Even so, the risks he’d taken were paying off. First thing that morning, Teddy’s radio squawked with a call from the gang leader, José Luis.

“*Guero*—The Russians are pulling back to the 285 freeway. You can

move up. I have three new sniper and machine gun spots for you."

Teddy knew nothing about running an intelligence asset. He needed advice from the Special Forces guys. He grabbed the motorcycle they were using to shuttle men and motored to the SF command tent. He found Daltrey drinking from a Black Rifle Coffee mug and pouring over maps.

"Hey Master Sarge," Teddy stood at attention.

"At ease Corporal." He grinned at Teddy over the rim of his mug; it said "Beyond Black" in yellow letters. Teddy didn't know if it was a race thing or a coffee thing. "Teddy! It looks like you've seen a few road miles since last I saw you."

"As have we all." Teddy glanced at the maps on the table and coveted them. "I noticed we didn't get a wedding gift from you." He looked up at the Master Sergeant. "Mika and I would happily accept your congratulations and a matching set of Denver City maps. That and maybe a cup of coffee."

"Kids these days." Daltrey shuffled through the pile on the table. "It's always entitlement with you guys." He pulled out two maps and set them in front of Teddy. They both said "Streetwise Denver" on the covers. Teddy salivated.

"You have no idea how much closer this will bring Mika and I. At last, we'll be able to communicate as a couple."

Daltrey chuckled. "Not everybody can work under their wife, Corporal," he said.

"It doesn't seem to be a problem. When she works on top of me, that's easier for me, right?" Teddy grinned like a young wolf.

Daltrey burst out laughing. "You're a fucking dweeb. You know that?"

"Roger that, Master Sarge."

"Wipe that over-sexed look off your face and tell me why you're disturbing my 'contemplation time' this fine morning."

"I think I may have recruited an intelligence asset." Teddy set his command radio on the map table. "He's a local gangbanger boss named José

Luis. We took down the Englewood prison together yesterday."

Daltrey's face took on an eager glow. "A gangbanger asset? Holy shit. That's on my must-do list, right above 'midget gymnast.'"

"His gang suppressed a Russian gun truck while we cleared a sniper off a roof. Then we doubled down on the truck from above. Turned out to be a good op. We eliminated five Whites with no casualties on our side."

"Eliminated? You mean 'wasted?'" Daltrey took another sip of coffee. "Don't worry, *President's Son*, you don't have to color in the lines with me."

Teddy wasn't sure he wanted to color that far outside of the lines.

"Your dirtbag—what gang is he running?" Daltrey asked.

"Um, I don't know. I didn't ask."

Daltrey hunted around the tent and came back with a small notebook and a pen. He handed it to Teddy.

"New job: you're our connection to the local brigade. Find out what gang your boy is with, their affiliations, and who else they can bring into our family circle. We don't give a crap about who they robbed, raped or reamed. We'll worry about that later—if there is a later. For now, we need to know what they know. The Russians are pissing in the gangbangers' cornflakes too. The gangs will want us to do their pipe hitting for them. They'll happily give us locations of ambush sites, IEDs, command HQs, etcetera. For now, that works. Maybe we can even talk *General HandJob Harmer* into lobbing a couple arty rounds onto high value targets, if the intel proves out. Do you copy? You're our new dirtbag handler. If you keep this up, you might even surpass your honey mama in rank."

"Good copy, Master Sarge, but I don't think I want to be over her. She likes it better on top."

"Wipe that repulsive look off your face, Corporal Teddy. It's unseemly and you make filthy talk sound lame. See if you can get your gangster on the phone right now. Have Brighton in comms help you. Brighton's the one with the big antenna. Report back to me before you return to the field."

“Yessir.” Teddy grabbed the precious pair of maps and left to find Brighton and the comms tent.

Teddy spent two hours on the radio, making contact with José Luis, then connecting with his direct report, a gangster boss named Trujillo. The deal was simple enough: if the gangbangers fed them good, timely intel on targets, ambushes and IEDs, the partisans would hit those targets. For the time being, motivations were perfectly aligned.

Teddy hopped on the motorcycle and headed back to the West Third. By the time he got there, Abe Lightfoot was dead.

The Whites had indeed pulled back to the 285 freeway, but it’d been a devious withdrawal. They’d set a baffling series of booby traps in their wake. The one that got Abe had been set up specifically to kill a QRF.

As usual, the front line *indig* guys had moved up the streets in skirmish lines, instead of wedges. The *indig* had been losing guys for a week, and they found they lost fewer guys to mines and claymores if they walked spread out and online. But explosives weren’t their only fear—the Russians often set command-detonated claymores in conjunction with concealed machine gun positions.

The one that got Abe was a triple combo. The *indig* troops got raked by PKM fire from the top of a church, so they retreated into their typical posture when taking contact; they backed up behind stuff that stopped PKM rounds, in this case two brick homes. Then, the Whites clacked off claymores that peppered the brick houses from the opposite direction, wounding or killing ten *indig* guys. But that wasn’t all. The Russians were three steps ahead this time, instead of their customary two steps ahead.

When the QRF came forward to clear the PKM position, Teddy’s squad —run by Abe in his absence—maneuvered to the west of a church into a tightly-packed neighborhood of small homes. All-at-once, dozens of claymores ripped through the neighborhood, sending tens of thousands of ball bearings through flesh and bone. Abe had been wearing ceramic plates, but

one of the ball bearings punched through his eye socket. Four others on Teddy's QRF were badly wounded.

When they finally cleared the rooftop of the church, they found that the PKM had been modified with an electronic solenoid that clamped to the trigger guard and touched off a handful of rounds every ten minutes. It'd all been for nothing. They captured just one unmanned PKM machine gun in exchange for Abe's life, ten *indig* and four wounded.

Mika blamed herself for not noticing how the PKM fire had been precisely timed. Her face had gone slack and she was obviously working hard to remain standing. Teddy tried to tell her that they'd never seen a trap like that before, but she ignored his consolation.

With Teddy's QRF team gutted, the bulk of the West Third *indig* force continued with sagging shoulders and hollowed-out eyes. The *indig* had taken serious losses every day. Each man took their turn on point, without any idea where or when the next explosion would rip through them. The Denver metropolis was twenty-eight miles deep, and they'd cleared precisely five miles, south-to-north, in seven days. At the current pace, they'd be fighting street-to-street for six weeks, and that didn't count the inevitable slowdown when they reached the tightly-packed warrens of downtown. They did all this steeped in the smell of rotting flesh.

The West Third *indig* forces numbered barely over two thousand men. They'd traded a hundred and fifty lives, and at least that many wounded, to gain five miles of suburbia. They'd killed thirty-six Russians, as far as they could tell. Five of those had been Teddy's kills at the prison.

Time was against them. The numbers were against them. Their battlefield inexperience was against them. Yet, if they didn't exterminate this Spetsnaz unit, the outcome would almost certainly be a one-sided nuclear holocaust.

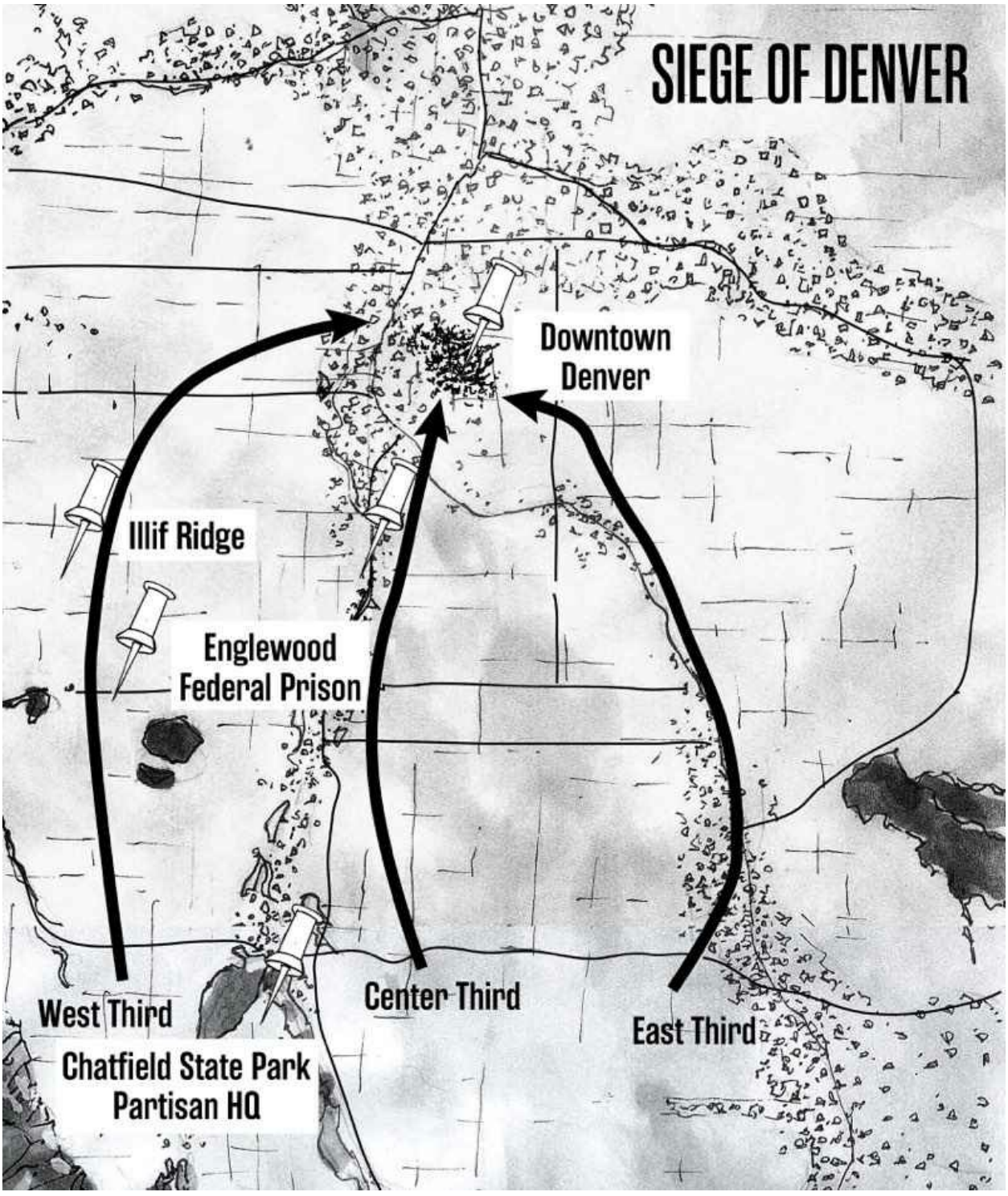
Teddy took Mika by the shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "Forget about Abe, Mika. He's gone and he'd want you to focus. We'll grieve him later. We'll raise a glass with his family and remember his every crazy move.

But now, reorganize the platoon. Get us back in the fight."

She nodded. Teddy helped her back into her plate carrier vest and carried her rifle as they greeted the gathering platoon.

"I guess the Russians want to do this the motherfucking hard way," she shouted at her soldiers. "I think Abe would want us to give it to 'em. So, let's fuck 'em up this afternoon. Let's do it for Abe."

The men and women of the West Third QRF shouted their agreement. They were more angry than pumped up, but anger would do.


SIEGE OF DENVER
Downtown Denver
Illif Ridge
Englewood Federal Prison
West Third
Center Third
East Third
Chatfield State Park Partisan HQ

18

South Platte Power Station,
Denver, Colorado

An hour before first light, Vitaly climbed the ladder onto the catwalk around the towering smokestacks of the South Platte power station. Seventy-five meters above the ground, the temperature dropped five degrees celsius. Luckily, the wind wasn't blowing this morning. It'd been even colder in the pre-dawn ice box. After four hours of lying still, his toes had gone completely numb. He kept one of his hands in his pants, alongside his balls. It was an old Russian sniper trick—to switch off hands down the pants. Gloves were worthless in a sniper hide. His hands froze no matter what he did to insulate them. As far as Vitaly could remember, he'd never served anywhere it wasn't cold. It was like a curse over his career—over his entire life as a Russian—he never got warm. He fucking hated the cold, but at least the air didn't smell like sickly-sweet, rotting guts this high off the ground.

Maybe today he would find the white-hair sniper, or the white-hair sniper would find him. Metropolitan Denver was vast, but they both seemed to be working the central corridor—the industrial artery along Highway 85. Even in a city this size, there were only so many apartments, towers and smokestacks. The two snipers were on a collision course, bound by high

ground and duty.

The evening before, Vitaly had packed flattened, cardboard boxes up the ladder to the catwalk, then weighed them down with water bottles. He needed cover, or the smokestack would be the obvious place to search for a sniper. He needed it to appear a little less obvious.

Vitaly didn't think he'd shoot from the smokestack. He never shot from a perch without safe egress. But the tower gave him an unrestricted view of the city and the 285 freeway. From its height, he could place enemy sniper activity, then move up on the most-promising location.

The belt route was the front line now that Spetsnaz forces had withdrawn behind it. His comrades had spent two days preparing claymores, mines and traps in the suddenly-vacated gap. Since first light, he'd seen twelve fireballs.

If Vitaly were inclined to sadness, the wasted youth in the carnage might've bothered him. He'd reached the conclusion that most of the enemy troops were Native Americans—probably conscripted from surrounding communities as cannon fodder. Throwing their pawns at the Russian knights was a hard thing on the part of the Americans. A good chess player knew: the game was won with pawns. But not this game. Denver was a battle of knights, with a ring of rooks surrounding them.

Little did the Americans know that within another week—two at most, if the Russian officers could be believed—the Spetsnaz battalion would be sprung from the artillery-studded noose around Denver. The air base in Cheyenne, Wyoming was being loaded with fuel and munitions for Russian attack helicopters, even now working their way down from Alaska. Soon, the skies over Denver would swarm with Mi-28 Havoc and Mi-24 Hind helicopters. They would turn the artillery and Strykers to scrap metal. All the American bravery—going street by street, throwing bodies at bombs—would be for nothing. Vitaly had seen enough war to know; it was usually like this. War was a fool who swallowed poison to kill his enemy.

He was that brand of fool, and he'd resigned himself to the fate of an

aging, hobbling Spetsnaz veteran. He'd die in battle or die in a bottle. Either way, Vitaly would die at war. Until then, he would very much like to kill the white-hair sniper. An old man's life for an old man's life. Better to leave the children out of it for once.

Vitaly's radio crackled, "Wolf Spider to Buzzard One."

"Go for Buzzard One," he replied. His cheeks were so numb from the cold he could barely talk.

"Buzzard One: report in-person to Comms Center Two. Orders from Lieutenant Kasparov."

It was a joke. There was no Lieutenant Kasparov, nor was "Kasparov" the young lieutenant's call sign. Vitaly had consistently beat the young officer at chess throughout their deployment. He'd referred to the chess grand master's name—Garry Kasparov—so Vitaly would know that it wasn't an order. The joke implied, from one friend to another, that it'd be worth it to dig his way out of his sniper hide, come downtown, and get a hot coffee.

The one hand not down his pants—his trigger hand this time—could barely work the radio, and the morning was growing stale. He'd seen nothing that gave away the white hair's position. Hot coffee sounded even better than burrowing in the hay with a farm girl.

"Buzzard One en route," Vitaly whispered into the radio.

IT WAS TOO stuffy and foul-smelling inside the Day's Inn, so the food had been set up under the awning outside. Dutch sat at a plastic table, eating late breakfast alone.

He nudged a clot of eggs around his plate and dwelt on all that'd been lost. He'd killed another Russian that morning, and he still couldn't bring himself to despise them. He felt the loss almost as much as he felt the friends who'd died, and the native kids who'd been blown up.

Dutch was a clever sniper, which had a lot less to do with marksmanship than he'd originally imagined. Urban distances rarely exceeded a couple hundred yards. He could usually see the facial hair of his targets across boulevards, skulking down side streets, or peering through windows.

Dutch's secret weapon was a roll of window screen he'd found on a shelf in an abandoned carport. After Russell died, Dutch gave up shooting from rooftops. Now, he'd crack a window, or punch a hole in a wall, tape up some window screen, sit back and wait for a target to appear.

They'd assigned Dutch three young spotters after the loss of Russell, but he had little appetite for their company. Dutch positioned them in neighboring buildings. When a target flickered into view across no-man's land, his spotters walked Dutch into the location over the radio with meticulous direction. It allowed the spotters to search on the oblique—cross-ways out their windows at intersecting angles to one another, without exposing themselves directly.

Dutch's first rule: never search for a target at greater than a thirty degree angle to the window pane. His second rule: never cross a window standing up.

As his eggs went cold, the spotters chattered in his earbud. Dutch had taken late breakfast at the platoon strong point. Honcho sat by his legs, with a locked stare, waiting for bits to fall off the side of the plate.

Dutch eased a lump of egg into free-fall. Honcho snatched it in mid-flight.

An approaching motorcycle stoked his troubled thoughts.

Would a nuclear exchange over the dead lands of a dead nation be worth the lives of men like Russell?

"Dad." The word jangled against the spotters talk of "targets" and "enemy positions" in his ear. Dutch yanked the earbud out by the cord.

"Hey, Dad."

It was his son, Teddy. The boy's face was filthy, and his beard had grown

into an uneven field of stubble.

Teddy sat down in a banquet chair. “How’re you holding up? I heard about Russell Yellowhorse. Are you doing all right?”

“I’m okay,” Dutch lied and took a bite. “How’re you?” he asked around the mouthful of cold eggs.

“I’ve lost friends. It fucking sucks—pardon my language.”

“No,” the president agreed. “You’re right. It does fucking suck.” His son had probably never heard him say that word before. It was the only word that fit the grueling travesty of the moment, the war, and the world.

Teddy nodded, waiting for his father to swallow, then got to the point. “I need to talk to you about the thing with the natives and the Constitution.”

“The Constitution?” Dutch couldn’t remember why he cared at first. It was like entering a building from the alleyway instead of the front entrance. He didn’t recognize the back hallways and he’d forgotten why he’d come in the first place.

The whole disagreement he’d with Joe Whiterock had to be rebuilt in his mind, bit-by-bit. When it was reconstructed, he struggled to see why it’d been a big deal. His duty to the presidency had taken a fresh irrelevance after he saw Russell Yellowhorse’s brain.

Dutch rewound the tape in his head and started over from their reconnaissance mission in Wyoming: the ambush in the snow. The ceremony in Window Rock. The battle for Pueblo. The everlasting siege of Denver—which had only begun ten days before. Dutch had lived an eternity since he’d departed Duck Valley. Sharon’s lovely face seemed like it couldn’t possibly still exist. Not after all that’d transpired.

“Dad? Are you all right?” Teddy asked again.

“*Hmm*.” Dutch sat up straighter. “Given the circumstances, I‘m okay. I was just thinking about your mother. I was trying to picture her face.”

Teddy’s eyebrows bunched up. “Seems like she lives in a fairy tale land—somewhere that doesn’t smell like dead people.”

Dutch nodded. “At least if they nuked this place, it’d burn away the reek.”

The black humor didn’t seem to be anything Teddy wanted to hear.

“Dad. I’ve got to get back to my unit. We’re moving up another block in an hour. Have you made a decision about the native request—what they want you to help do with the Constitution?”

“I honestly haven’t thought about it,” Dutch said. “It doesn’t seem important right now.”

“You know the natives have lost over four hundred fighters, right?”

“Yeah. I know,” Dutch said. Their bodies were in a mass grave out by Chatfield, never to return to their family lands.

Teddy looked his father in the eyes. It dragged Dutch’s attention from the plate of wasted food. “Mika told me something you should consider. They didn’t pick those amendments out of thin air. An AI computer figured out how we could rebuild the United States faster, and how to avoid the next collapse. It’s the same AI they used to predict the stock market crash. It’s helping them figure out how to reform the republic.”

Dutch did his best to swim up from the swamp that enveloped him. He didn’t say anything for a full minute. He mulled the words and digested the implications.

“AI? Artificial Intelligence?” He stared at Teddy from under hooded brows.

“Yes.”

“So they used artificial intelligence to predict the collapse, then they asked that same AI to suggest changes to the founding basis of the nation?” Dutch repeated what he’d heard.

“Correct,” Teddy confirmed.

“The tribes were monkeying with AI modeling?” Dutch found it very hard to believe. “Indians did that? What the hell for?”

The NSA and CIA used artificial intelligence for many things—mostly

military surveillance—but not to predict the future. It seemed impossible for the tribes to accomplish something the federal government or private corporations hadn't. The whole idea seemed frankly absurd. The combined economies of the Indian reservations were dwarfed by the State of Vermont. How could they have predicted the Black Autumn collapse?

Teddy shrugged. "Joe Whiterock did the whole thing on a lark. Mika's roommate at UCLA was some kind of AI genius. They stuck her in a basement with a ton of computing power and cut her loose on policy analysis for the Native American Congress. Poof! She came up with historical predictions using regression analysis, and it turned out to be pretty damned accurate."

It sounded like bullshit to Dutch. Like most Americans, he'd thought of the massive U.S. government as being Massively Smart. Unless it had to do with building better weapons, the government didn't ask questions unless they already knew the answer. Nobody in government liked being surprised. Being surprised meant that things would change. Bureaucracy liked things the same.

On the second pass at the idea, Dutch saw how Native Americans might ask unsettling questions. They hated the way things were. They wanted things to change. Joe Whiterock adored the idea of throwing monkey wrenches in the blurring gears of the machine. But it still seemed weird that they used technology to do it.

Dutch connected the dots. "That explains why the language they asked for is so strange. A computer wrote it. They want me to agree to randomly-generated amendments."

Teddy looked around. Like everywhere in Denver, trash blew against dead cars, into fences and around desiccated bushes. "Could it really be worse than this? Congressman-farmers? Veteran voters? Taxes on robots?"

Dutch chuckled under his breath. "Yes. It could be worse. The nation could've collapsed after five years instead of two hundred and fifty years.

And, it’s not so simple to change the Constitution. Amendments aren’t for a president to decide.”

“Aren’t they?” Teddy challenged. “You’re what’s left of the government. Improve our chances, Dad. Give the next generation something to work with. Give us something to hope for. We don’t care where the idea came from.”

“Why didn’t Joe tell me all this before?” Dutch changed the subject.

Teddy hesitated. “There’s a problem with the programmer woman. Apparently she’s not a nice person. They’re afraid if you meet her, you’ll lose faith in them.”

“If they don’t trust me to know the truth, then why should I trust them? In my experience, when the other guy doesn’t trust you, it’s usually because he isn’t trustworthy.”

Teddy leaned in and looked his father in the eye. “Trust *me*, then. Trust *me* on this.”

The words punched Dutch in the solar plexus. He recoiled. “That’s not fair. You’re asking me to put the fate of the country in your hands like this is a worthiness test for me as a father. The *people* elected me. They didn’t elect you. This is *my* sacred duty, not yours.”

“I get that, Dad, and I hold your office in the highest esteem. But you’re making a decision based on a character judgment of Joe Whiterock. You’re judging my wife’s character too, and I’m here—your son—telling you that she’s the *real deal.* She’s a person of the highest moral integrity. She’s been running their AI asset for four years and she’s sure of its reliability. I don’t care if you trust Joe Whiterock or not, but please trust my wife.”

Dutch exhaled. He felt pinned between a galloping horse and its saddle. The Teddy he knew was not qualified to assess a person’s character—not with stakes this high. Not by a long shot. The Teddy he knew could barely say *no* to a frat house drinking binge. Now, he was telling Dutch how to run the country—that the president should support amendments to the Constitution, by God.

Yet when he looked into Teddy's eyes, he saw a man. If he were meeting Teddy for the first time, Dutch would say that he was a rock-solid person of great potential. He'd heard whispers from the Special Forces soldiers. They slapped Dutch on the back and told him stories of his son's bravery in combat. Perhaps Teddy wasn't the boy-in-a-man's-body he'd once been.

But could he rely on Teddy as a political advisor?

He could do much worse. In fact, Dutch had done much worse; his Secretary of Defense had turned out to be an evil man.

Yet…

He could not allow the love of a father to determine the fate of a nation. Not again. Not like on the airplane when they'd cut off Teddy's finger. Dutch would not, could not, let fatherhood overshadow his duty again.

"Thank you for the information," Dutch addressed his son like a president might address a lobbyist. He stood up from the table. "I'll take it into consideration."

"DUTCH," Joe Whiterock called out just as Dutch dumped the remainder of his tepid eggs into a leafless bush. Honcho slipped in under the dried sticks and slurped at the mess.

First Teddy, and now Joe Whiterock. Looks like this morning's a one-two punch.

Dutch needed to get back to his rifle. Back to the fight. One of his new spotters had taken over the Remington MSR, but the kid was a Navajo elk hunting guide. He knew ballistics, but had no experience in counter-sniper tactics. Dutch told him not to shoot except to save an American life. So, while Dutch took time with his son, and now Joe Whiterock, there was a hole in the net protecting his advancing troops.

"Hey, Joe." Dutch looked at his watch, hoping to cut the conversation

short. He'd found an analog watch on a dead kid in Pueblo. He didn't know if it was valuable or not, but it looked quality. Analog watches were suddenly very useful for a fighting man now that cell phones didn't tell time. "I have to get back to my unit."

Joe held up his hands. "I don't want to hold you up, but the Wind River natives gave me intel that sounded important. When I reported casualties last night, they said they had a team keeping an eye on Cheyenne. The Russians are ferrying fuel onto the airfield and storing it in bowsers. The Wind River guys think it's for aircraft. So far, only cargo planes have landed, but they're worried the Russians are getting ready for an attack, heading our way."

Dutch rubbed his stubble. Russian aircraft had been one of his many worries. Before the siege, the Russians hadn't needed air superiority. Now, with one of their battalions surrounded, they'd find a way to get them out. Air power was an obvious game-changer.

"What about the other Russians at Minot and Malmstrom? Do you have any news about them?" Dutch also worried that the Russians would dispatch more Spetsnaz to break through the encirclement.

"I'll find out. There are reservations near both bases."

"Great." Dutch slid back into his plate carrier vest. "Please report the new intel to Daltrey at HQ. Thanks."

The men shook hands, and Dutch returned to war, his puppy trailing.

VITALY'S FINGERS were still numb as he reached the communications center inside the derelict downtown cafe.

"This better be good, Kasparov," he thundered at the young lieutenant with a lavish grin. "You dragged me down off a smokestack where I was fantasizing about your sister."

The lieutenant laughed. "My sister weighs 130 kilos. If you're fantasizing

about her, you're sicker than I thought."

"Yes." Vitaly nodded sagely. "The large ones are better for keeping warm. I'd trade one big, warm pair of buttocks for three skinny asses right now. I'd curl up in the folds of your sister and forget this icy, shit-stinking hell."

The lieutenant bellowed laughter, then shot Vitaly a conspiratorial nod. "You want to locate the white-hair sniper, no? Listen here…" The young lieutenant led Vitaly to a monitoring station in the corner and flicked a switch. A speaker blared.

"…still at breakfast. I've got movement along Downing, but no snow camo. Maybe local street rats. Gang activity. I think I'll shift a block west. Can you cover my movement?"

"I've been listening to this channel all morning," the lieutenant explained. "I think it might be the team that supports your favorite sniper. They're coordinating in the open. Their radio has no security. If you listen to the details for a while, I think you can locate them."

This was a new wrinkle in the sniper game. Vitaly had never used comms intel before. Military radios were always secure, but the partisans relied on open frequencies. The game picked up a new dimension.

Vitaly clapped the lieutenant on the back. "This is good. Very interesting. Can I pull up a chair? I'd like to listen while I warm my toes."

"Help yourself. Hot tea is in the corner by the fancy American coffee machines."

Vitaly pulled up a chair and listened to the radio chatter long after his fingers and toes returned from frostnip.

THE *INDIG* TROOPS called Mika forward. They didn't know what to do next. When she got to the front, they'd stopped to hunker down, smoke cigarettes

and bleed off the stress. She was glad they'd called her up. Glad she could help save lives. The soldiers almost never got in trouble doing things too slowly. They routinely got in trouble going too fast.

The Navajo sergeant showed Mika the newest IED buried in a tiny park strip alongside a Marriott Residence Inn. The Russians had taken to setting mines in park strips. This was the biggest one she'd ever seen.

At first, the *indig* walked down the streets in single file. The Russians countered by firing PKM machine guns down the long axis of their columns. Single file was good for avoiding IEDs, but very bad for avoiding axial machine gun fire.

They switched to bounding down sidewalks in single file lines, using cars for cover. The Russians countered by loosening concrete sidewalk pads and placing anti-personnel mines underneath. It added a new dimension to the children's singsong, "Step on a crack and break your mother's back."

Then the *indig* made a rule: walk only on undisturbed snow and stay off blacktop and concrete. After that, it began to snow almost every night, which cost the West Third Army twenty more men.

Luckily, this mine wasn't command detonated. It was a new style of pressure plate. It would've been triggered by a misplaced step if the sharp-eyed Navajo kid hadn't seen the rim of PVC pipe sticking up out of the grass thatch.

The *indig* front line troops carried metal detectors from Fort Carson. They didn't do much against tripwires, but they excelled in finding buried landmines.

They'd missed this one. The Russians—well aware of the minesweepers—had chipped down four feet in the park strip, placed a landmine at the bottom, then gently placed a four foot section of PVC on top, over which they laid a toupee of dead grass.

The metal detectors couldn't detect the landmine four feet down. The entombed landmine wasn't the real threat though; it was wired into a series of

mortar shells set behind the wall of the Marriott.

The Russians had hacked away the interior wall and wired in thirty heavy mortar rounds aimed at the street. If an *indig* guy had stepped on the PVC riser, they would've lost half a platoon. The street would've been mowed flat for fifty yards.

Russian machine guns were hosing the parallel city streets with gun fire and channelizing them down this one, specific thoroughfare. It was possible that this was only *one* of *several* traps down the corridor. The Russians rarely set traps only one level deep.

"Back up, carefully, two blocks," Mika ordered the sergeant. "Move four blocks west—Vance Street, I think—and bound forward until you bypass that machine gun. Then double back on it."

The sergeant nodded.

It meant they'd have to cross the freeway into machine gun fire, but it was better than getting blown up. "Consolidate on the other side when you get to…" Mika consulted the street map Teddy had given her. "Girton Avenue."

"Yes, ma'am," the sergeant replied.

"What's this?" Teddy joined them. A soldier wrapped the area in yellow "crime scene" tape so nobody tripped the mine accidentally.

"It's a whole lotta bad news. There's a mine four feet down wired into thirty mortar rounds. The more time we give the Whites, the nastier they get. I can't leave this trap here. Some *indig* guy or a gangbanger kid is going to set it off."

"Call up the ODA. Ask them to hit the block with mortars. It'll destroy the Marriott, but…" Teddy shrugged. "I prefer the Fairfield, anyway. Free waffles."

Mika chuckled. "I'm glad someone's having a cheery day. What'd your dad say about the thing?"

Teddy's face shuffled through several emotions, many of them still

unfamiliar to Mika.

“He’s *taking it under consideration*, whatever that means.”

“He’s at war, Teddy. Don’t take anything he says too personally. He just lost a friend. None of us is thinking straight.”

“I know. You’re right.” He leaned his head against her shoulder. “I’m just so angry with myself. I wasted so much time. I could’ve been the kind of son he’d respect.”

The *indig* troop gathered to move out. Mika waved Teddy back to the QRF rally point, a block back. As they walked, she leveled with him. “You take a lot of personal accountability for stuff. I’m not sure if that’s good or bad, but it’s definitely new to me. I grew up writing lists of how I got screwed over by the system.”

“You *were* getting screwed over by the system,” Teddy said.

“Yeah, but we poured so much focus on it. The victim thing didn’t have to take over our lives. Given all this, I’m pretty sure my activist days were piss on the leaf pile.” She sighed. “What did I accomplish with all that, anyway? I probably should’ve been more like you. I should’ve focused on the stuff in front of me that I could change.”

“What are you talking about?” Teddy stared at her in disbelief. “You predicted the collapse and saved thousands of lives.”

“Bethany predicted the collapse,” Mika corrected. “Joe and I just spread the word. We got lucky.”

“Anyway,” Teddy turned the conversation back to his misgivings. “I don’t know what’s going on with my dad. It’s like he’s lost true north.”

“He just doesn’t know you like I do,” she countered. “He doesn’t know you like everyone around here knows you. He’s blinded by the past.”

“When we have kids, someday.” Teddy stopped, “Remind me not to get stuck on crusty, old ideas about them.”

“I will,” she said, but her mind meandered. Making a family with Teddy was a dream almost too lovely to bear. In the midst of the siege, it felt like

winter might go on forever/ Somewhere, beyond the gray shrouded skies, there might be a future where she and Teddy bore children and built a better world. The picture of it lifted her soul and blurred her grinding angst about booby traps and machine gun nests.

Children, she repeated the word in her mind like a rosary. *Someday, after all this, we will have children. Sweet-smelling, earth-brightening, hope-cradling children.*

Motherhood was her "true north" now. It was her reason to live and to die. It was her reason to make the world a better place. She saw it clearly for the first time. All her fiery passion for truth and justice had been driven by a buried kernel in her soul that not even she understood, not until everything else had been stripped away.

"Shift the advance three blocks west. Not two, but three blocks," Mika shouted to the sergeant in charge of the column. The Russians had been planting IEDs then setting even bigger traps the next block over. Then they moved those traps two blocks over. Then three. Then four. Mika had jumped back to a three block offset, since they'd probably go to five or back to one. She could barely keep track.

She despised this war, and she hated how the Russians took great pains to be clever in how they killed people. *Why couldn't they have just stayed home?*

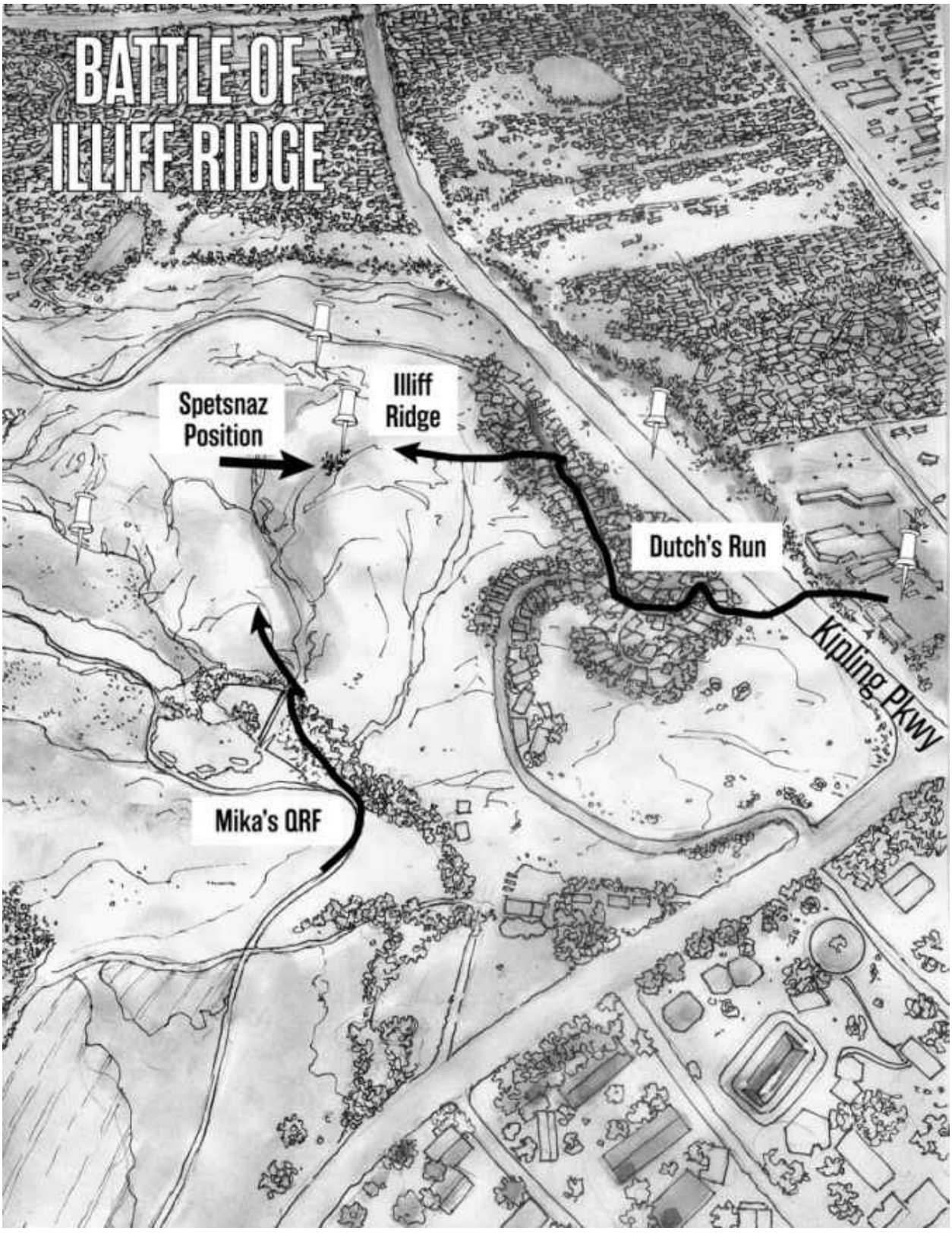
"Mika, let's get you back to the rally point." Teddy tugged her arm.

Would her family survive this? She looked at Teddy and felt a shock of sadness. *Would an IED take his life and erase their future?*

"Hey, hey, hey," he said, holding both of her hands. "We're going to be all right. We're going to get through this." He'd read her mind.

"I have a strong premonition that our family won't survive this putrid city," she said with a tremor in her voice.

"We will," he promised. "We will."


BATTLE OF
ILLIFF RIDGE
Spetsnaz
Position
Illiff
Ridge
Dutch's Run
Kipling Pkwy
Mika's QRF

19

West Third Army
Denver, Colorado

His conversation that morning with Teddy unnerved Dutch. He'd failed his son, though he couldn't quite figure out how. It had been a political conversation, but it also felt profoundly personal.

He'd requested and received a transfer to West Third Army to provide sniper overwatch for Mika, Teddy and their unit. He'd checked in with the Special Forces ODA that organized the West Third, but he didn't seek out Mika or Teddy to let them know. He went right to work.

Dutch moved without his team of spotters, leaving the elk hunting guide as the primary shooter in the Center Third. Dutch wasn't planning on being in the West Third long, so he got Mika's team frequency and pro words, then settled atop a loft above Moe's Original Barbecue. Strangely, it still smelled of barbecue sauce.

Over the next couple hours, the *indig* troop would clear a small neighborhood of luxury homes, then a tightly-packed block of tract homes. They'd consolidate on Jewell Avenue, then move north to the next block.

"Mika, this is Wrangler, checking in." Dutch used his call sign. "I've got overwatch between Kipling Parkway and Kipling Street. You copy?"

“Good copy, Wrangler. Welcome to the West Third. Mika out.”

Had that been a little terse? All military communication, if professionally done, was terse.

He’d carried Honcho up the roof access ladder. The blue heeler was curled into the letter “C” on the gravel and tar roof, licking at his undercarriage.

Below Dutch, the *indig* fighters filtered house to house, as frightened as deer mice. They stayed off the streets and avoided the sidewalks. It hadn’t snowed the night before, so they would at least know if anyone had passed through recently by the tracks. Dutch followed several sets of footprints ahead of the *indig* sweep—but they were likely from local residents, scurrying around for necessities like water, or to dump their human waste in the gutter. There were no broad furrows in the snow, like a troop of fighting men might make.

The more the partisans wrapped toward downtown, the more survivors they encountered. The wealthier suburbanites from the outskirts had mostly been allowed out of Denver and into the open plains. There, they likely succumbed to exposure, unless they had family who still farmed or ranched.

The city dwellers had been forced to make their own luck. They lived like rats—those who had survived the military cordon, the mountain winter, then this siege. The city had once been marbled with the fat of modern society—foodstuffs, wood, manufactured goods, fuels—and the residents had much to scavenge left behind by those who had fled. Now, almost February, Denver had been picked over like a corpse left on an ant hill. The few locals Dutch saw moving in daylight were walking skeletons, wraith-like in their shuffling.

There’d been occasion when the Special Forces ODA contemplated calling in artillery strikes against dangerous buildings, but so far, they’d not. There were tens of thousands, if not a hundred thousand Americans still within the city. If the partisans shelled a building, they would risk killing the doomed innocent.

Dutch followed each trail cut in the snow with his binoculars, ahead of the *indig* forces sweeping the streets with their rifle barrels. He saw no movement, and nothing that appeared to be a cluster of footprints indicating an ambush or IED.

“Buckshot to all stations, hold position. Repeat: hold position.”

The units acknowledged. The street sweepers stopped, found cover, and disappeared behind it.

“Buckshot” was Teddy’s call sign; given to him after the old man shot him in the leg above Vineland bridge.

“Local intel reports enemy force concentration concealed on Illiff Ridge,” Teddy warned over the radio. “QRF will intercept. Hold position.”

Dutch swiveled to the opposite side of the rooftop of the barbecue joint. Honcho looked up from his business. Illiff Ridge was behind the partisan skirmish line. If the Russians had dug in there, and waited for them to pass, they’d ambush the entire West Third from behind.

Illiff Ridge was a natural high point, a craggy spine that divided the Bear Creek Golf Club from the neighborhoods along Kipling Parkway. The rise held a wedge of wilderness trapped between two pincers of suburban sprawl. Several brush-choked knobs towered over the homes of the once-wealthy. Dutch had ignored the ridge as a threat because friendly forces had cleared all the streets around it, but they hadn’t specifically cleared the spotty woods. Any Russians caught behind partisan lines would have the devil to pay when they attempted to return to their own forces, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t try. They’d tried every other conceivable move in this bloody game of cat-and-mouse—leaving a stay-behind suicide squad to bushwhack the partisans seemed par for the course.

Dutch shifted his attention to Illiff Ridge, but his view was partially blocked by a street of mini mansions on the opposite side of the Parkway. He was alone, other than Honcho, and it’d be dangerous for him to move solo without cover, but he wasn’t going to let his son and daughter-in-law operate

while his rifle leaned against a wall. Dutch gathered his assault pack, slung the big rifle, scooped up the puppy and climbed down out of the loft.

He called in his movement as he sprinted across Kipling Parkway and ducked into a backyard with an expansive, dead lawn and a newly-built cedar play set. Dutch took a calculated risk and ignored the homes—neglecting to clear them. It would've taken the better part of an hour. He crossed the residential street and hustled for the highest point on the ridge—a pointy knob of granite and chokecherry that dominated all others.

Every second counted. His son would be maneuvering around the ridge at that moment from the opposite, golf course side. If Dutch could've sprinted up the mount, he would've, but his fastest move at his age was to run up the steep incline in short, pumping lunges. He thought of it as "gearing down," like down-shifting on a bicycle; same running pace, less forward motion. More than once, he'd out-run younger trainees using the trick.

He'd rolled the rifle off his back and into his hands as he chug-chug-chugged up the rise. He needed to protect the rifle should he slip. The optic had been his faithful companion and Dutch wouldn't risk even the slightest chance at knocking it off-target.

He neared the apex of the ridge and slowed.

He keyed his radio. "Wrangler is on the top of the highest point, opposite your position. Please don't shoot me," he radioed in a whisper. "Acknowledge."

Mika acknowledged.

The run hadn't been anything worthy of note for Honcho, but he obviously sensed Dutch's tension. The puppy stood back, wide-stanced and muscular. He watched and listened.

Dutch belly-crawled around the base of a pile of granite. Just below, a triangle of year-round shade held a half-acre of chokecherry overshadowed by a hundred-year-old maple. From this angle—behind and above—Dutch had a view directly into the thicket. Deep in the chokecherry and rabbit brush,

at least four Russian Spetsnaz soldiers lay in wait, observing the QRF's approach across the distant fairway. The Russians had at least one belt-fed PKM. They must've slid into position two days before, because there were no tracks in the snow leading into their hide.

Dutch rolled back around the knob and broadcast in a whisper, "Wrangler to Buckshot. Hold at next cover and prepare to suppress the patch of brush below my pos. Repeat: below the highest point on the ridge. Estimate four Whites. Light machine guns. Acknowledge."

"Buckshot to Wrangler. Confirmed. Enemy position below highest crag in the triangular-shaped cluster of brush."

"Recommend you light 'em up at your earliest convenience," Dutch suggested.

"Confirmed," Mika took over. "All stations prepare to engage triangle brush patch seventy-five meters below highest point of ridge."

Dutch thought about the Russians' oversight. It'd been a gamble—like climbing up a tree. If they hadn't been detected by the locals, they would've killed a lot of dudes. But the locals lived there, and his sons' gangbanger friends wouldn't miss much. Residents saw all.

The Russians weren't able to put security on the highest point. They'd settled for the cover just below the peak, and that'd given Dutch a "ballistic shadow" for an approach.

Dutch wiped the sweat off his brow and pawed the pockets of his vest. He'd jammed two grenades into pockets around the sides. He struggled to dig them out, laying on his back and lurching the vest around one way, then the other. Honcho cocked his head at Dutch's wriggling antics.

When the QRF opened up on the Russians, Dutch wasn't going to be able to poke his head over the ridge. There would be a ton of frag zinging in his direction. He hadn't forgotten the fan-spray of tracer at the Vineland Bridge. Daltrey still wore a livid scar from it. Tossing grenades was the best Dutch could do.

“QRF in position. Execute, execute, execute,” Mika called over the radio.

The ridge went kinetic. Guns roared. Rounds pinged off the granite, buzzed and whirred in every direction. Dutch scrambled to his knees against the slope. He’d have a hard enough time throwing upright—he wasn’t going to attempt it lying down.

He took a best guess of the Russian’s direction and heaved one, then the other grenade over the hilltop. Thunder added to the fusillade. The Russians opened up their PKM and rifles in response. Dutch lay down on his back and drew his 1911 handgun. The Russians might bolt for the peak now that they’d been made by the partisans.

No one came, and after a minute of sustained incoming fire, Mika called a stop to the shooting.

“Wrangler, confirm?” Teddy radioed.

Dutch slid, an inch at a time, around the knob, with his MSR rifle out ahead of him. He lifted his head two millimeters to peek over the lip and came face-to-face with a PKM machine gun fifty meters below, pointing at him. Dutch flopped flat and scrambled back down the slope like a crab being chased by a gull. The Russian machine gun opened up and chewed at the air over his nose. Dutch scrambled backward as bullets ate through the rock, hungry for his head. Honcho dropped to his belly.

Dutch clawed at the push-to-talk button, but the QRF unleashed on the Russians before he could scream for help. The Spetsnaz must’ve figured out the source of the grenades.

Time to skedaddle.

Dutch hefted his rifle, popped to his knees and bolted down the hill toward the mini mansions. He reached the first building and caught himself on the corner, swung around, then rushed back to a row of over-full trash cans. He propped the rifle over the top of a can and steadied his sights on the peak he’d just abandoned. A man in snow camo lurched into silhouette brandishing an AK-47. Dutch placed a round in his chest. He flipped

backward and lay still. Another Russian appeared, but crumpled forward and rolled down the hill before Dutch could shoot, a victim of Teddy's team's raking fire.

Sixty seconds later, the shooting stopped.

"This is Wrangler to Buckshot. I'm going to make my way back to overwatch position."

"Dad. You're okay. Thank God. Let me get this." Teddy heaved for breath into the mic.

"Repeat: I'm climbing back to overwatch. Don't shoot me." Dutch refused Teddy's offer. Dutch would go around the other side of the knob, but peaking over the edge was going to be dangerous as hell. Assaulting toward the Russians, like Teddy was doing, was equally perilous. Now that everybody knew where everybody was, there would be no way of doing this without risk. All elements of surprise had been played out. Now it was a game of who-saw-who-first. You'd know you lost the game when your world went black.

"Hold up, you damned cowboys," Mika interrupted over the radio. "Billings is bringing up a mortar. Just sit tight and hold what you got."

"Negative," Teddy shouted. "If we give them enough time, they're going to figure out a way to kill us. We need to assault through, now."

Dutch sighed. Teddy was right. The Russians weren't going to hunker down and lick their wounds. They'd go down fighting. This wasn't the kind of war where the other side took prisoners and awarded them three hots and a cot.

Dutch renewed his scramble. When he reached the left side of the peak, he had to grab Honcho by the fur and pull him back before he wandered into the enemy's line of sight.

"Someday, you'll go first, brave boy. Just not today," Dutch consoled the confused dog.

"Assaulting…" Teddy barked on the radio. Gunfire resumed. Dutch

crawled the last four feet and rolled the rifle's muzzle down upon the wedge of greenery below.

His heart filled with blinding terror. He saw his son rushing toward the enemy, too fast and too brave for his friends to keep up. From his bird's-eye-view, Dutch could see it all—like plastic, green army men laid out on a sand table. Mika's unit, five hundred yards back on the golf course, pouring fire into the hillside. Teddy's unit, strung across the steep face of the drainage below the Russian position. Teddy himself, charging up the canyon, his legs flying like furious pistons, his rifle pumping up and down, up and down, as he rushed into the maw of the Russian machine gun nest.

Dutch's optic danced through the brush, seeking, seeking, seeking. Then, movement.

A Russian hefted a PKM and bounced it into position to loose a glinting belt on Dutch's son. Dutch sighted. Exhaled. Pressed the trigger. The rifle roared, then settled.

Teddy flew over the berm with the PKM and punched into the midst of the Russians. Rifles chattered. ARs and AKs. Teddy dodged from brush knot to brush knot, firing and lunging, like a defensive end hunting the quarterback. Teddy's men followed him into the pocket of green. Another furious gunfight erupted. Dutch cranked his scope's magnification down and struggled to find a clear shot, but the copse of brush was a melee and the assaulters were like hounds among the hogs.

As fast as it'd begun, it ended. The echoes of gunfire died. Dutch searched the brush for his son.

He found him, bent over at the waist, holding himself up with his hands on his knees. *Was he wounded or winded?*

Teddy straightened up, held himself upright against a maple, slapped one of his passing men on the shoulder, then laughed at something someone had said.

He was alive.

His son was alive.

Dutch finally released the breath he'd been holding.

They were all alive.

The Russians were dead.

TEN MINUTES LATER, Dutch joined his son over the bodies of the six dead Russians. They were a grisly mess. The gunfire had cut down scores of trees. The Russian winter camouflage was soaked in blood—nothing worth relocating for burial. One of the QRF boys dragged a dead Russian off the ridge and laid his body to rest with his comrades' splattered remains. Two of the Sho-Pai boys went to collect the body that'd rolled down the other side of the hill.

Teddy regarded him as Dutch arranged a dead Russian next to his friend.

"You know, you really are a good man, Dad; a no-shit decent guy," Teddy said.

"*Hmm.* Thanks," Dutch mumbled. He wished he could say more—tell his son what he'd just seen; how his heart was, even now, overwhelmed by the fresh-hewn bravery he'd witnessed in his son.

A man was never meant to witness that, Dutch realized. It was altogether too much. A man should never see his son become ten times the man he was. The pride of it—and the shame—they were more than he could bear.

"Are you okay?" Teddy's pulled his father around to look into his eyes. Dutch wondered what his son would see.

"I thought I'd just watched you die," Dutch fumbled with the partial truth. It was a thing to say that took the place of the thing he should've said. The things Dutch was feeling were like a firecracker in the fist. A wound that burst the stitches. A truth that laid waste to the half-false legends of a life.

Dutch's greatness—the duly-elected President of the United States—was

a jingling handful of keys compared to what he'd just seen. It wasn't just the courageous assault that broke Dutch's heart, it was his son just after. He effortlessly forgot himself. He didn't tarry in the glory of his courage, or his deeds. He checked on his men. He looked into his aging father's eyes. *"Are you okay?"* Teddy had asked, even as the mad adrenaline washed over them in declining waves.

He who finds his life shall lose it, Dutch remembered the verse. *And he who loses his life for My sake shall find it.*

His son had become that man—the servant of those he loved—absent to himself, blind and mute to his own nobility. Dutch would never be that man. The time was too short. The rhythms of self-focus were set so deeply within him that Dutch would never be free. His sense of greatness—his focus on his own legacy; they were his prison, and he would never find the lock, much less the key.

But his son was free of it, and Dutch felt both jealous and redeemed.

"I trust you, Ted," Dutch said, apropos of nothing, out of the blue. "I'm going do the thing with the natives; what you asked me to do. I'll call a convention of the states and put the their amendments to a vote. I'll place my authority behind the process, for what it's worth. I don't understand what you're asking—and I don't get the AI thing at all—but I believe in you. I believe in Mika. In my gut, I know that you're the best shot we have." He gripped his son's shoulder.

Teddy shifted uncomfortably. For a moment, in Dutch's eyes, it reminded him of the year Teddy dressed up like an army man for Halloween. Dutch blinked back tears and his sight cleared. The warrior and husband before him came into focus. He wished he could share this moment with Sharon. He missed her so much it planted a hard pit in his stomach.

"I'm so mad at you I could spit." Mika Whiterock—now McAdams—waded up to Teddy. She blanched when she realized they stood over the grave of the Russians. "Oh." She stepped back. No warrior would disrespect

their sacrifice. “They wouldn’t surrender,” she apologized to the dead.

“No,” Dutch agreed. “Those bastards were hard, and there are hundreds more between here and home.”

“Thousands more,” Sergeant Billings added as he climbed up the hill behind Mika. “I just got a call from her grandad.” He jutted his chin at Mika. “Another two battalions of Spetsnaz are on their way from Montana. We’re out of time.”

Dutch closed his eyes and sighed. The astounding bravery of his son, and the Russians—they were a raindrop in a hurricane. A few lives spent bravely in the midst of millions of dead.

War must be played one-moment-at-a-time, Dutch understood. It was the only way it could be tolerated.

Somehow, it was better now that Dutch capitulated to the truth. The world had moved on from him. He hadn’t failed when he saved his son on that airplane. He’d placed a bet on the nation’s future. And he’d set the course of his own obsolescence.

Perhaps every man met this day, if he lived long enough—the day a man realized he would not comprehend that which was to come. It was, perhaps, the day a vital man became an elder man.

Dutch slung his rifle, gathered his dog, and followed his son and his son’s wife down Illiff Ridge.

VITALY HID in the loft of a small house in a tumbledown neighborhood as the partisans passed by on their way towards downtown. Getting behind enemy lines wasn’t a problem. The partisans couldn’t clear every room in every house. If Vitaly didn’t shoot at them, they wouldn’t even know they’d passed him. He’d stashed his rifle, handgun and kit in an attic. If they caught him, he’d claim to be an Armenian immigrant. He spoke English well enough to

sell it, and almost no American knew the difference between an Armenian and a Russian accent.

He was two blocks from Porter Adventist Hospital; whatever the hell an “Adventist” was. Vitaly offset a couple blocks away. He figured the white hair sniper might set up on the sixth story rooftop of the hospital. Sometimes the easiest way to kill a sniper was face-to-face.

He found some clothes in a drawer and changed out of his whites. He folded his Russian fatigues neatly, then stowed them in the bottom of his three-day assault pack. When full dark fell over the neighborhood, he collected his guns and vest, and shuffled out the door.

From what he’d gathered listening to the radio, the sniper team slept in the rear with the gear, then moved to overwatch position a couple hours before dawn. The partisans were moving fast now through Denver—a half-mile a day. Their overwatch snipers didn’t have time to set up multi-day sniper hides. The next bump north would probably be the University of Denver, and that’d give the partisans a dozen tall buildings to choose from. As they closed in on downtown, battle lines would compress. For Vitaly, floating behind enemy lines would likely lead to confrontation. Confrontation was becoming as likely as death.

His Spetsnaz company had lost over two hundred men, and the reality of their entrapment had begun to sink in. This was no game where Russians played the part of the clever chess masters. This was a death match, and they were being herded by an army of ten thousand against a ring of artillery. When Vitaly finally killed the white hair sniper, it’d give his brothers something to cheer about. Maybe then Russian helicopters would come. Maybe reinforcements from Montana would make it in time. More likely, the brass would bungle it all and the whole unit would die in downtown Denver. Either way, Vitaly had a job to do. He would buy them time, and maybe hand them a few sniper victories.

It was black-dark when the enemy halted their forward advance and the

battlefield calmed for the night. Spetsnaz were equipped with night vision goggles and most of the Americans were not. Pressing the Russians at night would be suicide, so the siege had found its own cadence: fight during the day and rest at night. Set ambushes and traps during the day, and withdraw toward downtown at night.

Vitaly used the nighttime window to slip into the Porter hospital and climb onto the highest roof. He picked the lock on the access door instead of breaking it, so an American sniper team wouldn't notice anything amiss. Most the locks in this godforsaken hellscape had been broken already, but not the roof access door of the hospital. There was nothing up there worth stealing, he assumed.

Vitaly found a place to curl up in his sleeping bag. The stars shown bright and the clouds retreated into the Rockies. It was clear, but as cold as a statue's marble titties. He'd be okay in the open. The Spetsnaz issued extremely warm sleeping bags. He cinched the bag up around his face and breathed through a hole barely bigger than his nose and mouth.

As he coaxed himself to sleep, he heard the muted mumbling of the American soldiers, drifting two or three blocks behind lines. Observing them, he'd come to know their faces and their story. These were mostly American natives—"Indians" they called them; an ancient misnomer that'd stuck. They weren't from India. Not at all.

Vitaly remembered one summer during boyhood, playing with friends in the forest around the family *dacha*. His favorite game had been American cowboys versus American Indians. It was after the reunification of East Germany and old American films had flooded into Russia like orphan children looking for love. Russians had been more than happy to gobble up American black and white films after decades of stilted Soviet propaganda movies. Vitaly couldn't remember which had been his favorites, since he'd watched dozens of movies of the American West. The heroes were a lot like Russian heroes—dangerous men with troubled pasts. He and his friends

fashioned lever-action rifles out of pine boughs, and bows and arrows out of elderberry limbs. He'd always been a big boy for his age, so his friends begrudgingly accepted him in the role of John Wayne.

Here he was, a lifetime later, still carrying a long gun, and still killing Indians. Vitaly grinned, but in his heart, he hated this life as a soldier. Yet under the frozen stars, he couldn't imagine anything else.

VITALY WOKE BEFORE DAWN, collected his things, and tucked himself in the gap between an air conditioning unit and the brick wall behind the access door. He unzipped the sleeping bag and wrapped it around him like a shawl. He drew his GSh-18 pistol, screwed on the suppressor, cradled it in his lap and waited.

Around 5:30 a.m., he heard a creak on the neighboring rooftop, then mumbled voices. The American sniper team had chosen another rooftop, but that was fine. It meant Vitaly would have the high ground. He could afford to wait until first light to kill them.

He rested while his heartbeat calmed, and thought about options. The neighboring rooftop was actually a lower step-down of the same building, so the distance wouldn't be more than thirty meters. Vitaly had only his bolt-action rifle and his sidearm. He hadn't carried an assault rifle on this mission. He carried suppressors for both long gun and hand gun, but the rifle would be considerably louder, even so. If he braced, the 9mm would do fine at that distance, and he could fire shots in quick succession.

As the light in the east strengthened, he crept slowly to the edge of the roof. The voices mumbled and laughed softly. He reached the metal-clad lip and slid the GSh over the edge.

Below, a dark-haired man and a blonde woman peered over the opposite edge—he with a rifle and she with binoculars. They had their backs to Vitaly.

The partisan troops hadn’t moved out yet for their morning advance, so the young snipers waited and joked.

Vitaly made a slight hold-over adjustment to his aim for the thirty meters, and pressed the trigger. The man’s head lurched forward as a bullet passed through the base of his skull. The woman lowered her binoculars and stared at her companion in confusion. Vitaly shot her three times in the torso. She gurgled, then slid to the gravel roof, drowning in her own blood. The GSh had made no more noise than the crack of a towel in a locker room. There had been no white hair sniper on the roof, unfortunately.

Vitaly collected his belongings, even the four spent shell casings, and erased all sign of his presence. He cracked the door, cleared the dark stairwell, then descended to the other rooftop. He picked the lock, then crawled out on the roof to inspect his kills. Fortunately, the blood from the man’s head wound had sprayed over the side of the building and not on his clothing.

He stripped the dead man down to his underwear and relieved him of his American camouflage. The plate carrier vest was too large to fit in Vitaly’s pack, unfortunately, but the man’s camo went into the bottom, on top of his Russian whites. He collected their weapons and ammo and tossed them onto the roof of a shed where no one would look. Then, he retraced his steps all the way out of the hospital and down to the street.

As bad luck would have it, he’d ambushed one of the sniper teams that didn’t matter to him. It was still a good morning’s work, and the telltale blood splatter from his assassination-style killing would terrify the other American sniper teams.

Vitaly slunk back to his loft and resolved to wait out the day. The Americans might search the hospital for their snipers’ killer, but they wouldn’t range out much farther than the hospital grounds. When night fell, he’d slip around their strong points and cross back into friendly territory where he could get a hot meal and a warm bed.

Now, he possessed an American uniform and two ham radios set to the sniper team's channel. If they didn't change their frequency, he'd added another advantage. If they did change frequency, the young lieutenant would find the new one for him soon enough.

JOE WHITEROCK COULDN'T FIND Dutch McAdams, so he reported his news to Colonel Devlin. "My Wind River observers tell me the Russians have landed at least six attack helicopters at Warren airfield."

"Roger that. Come with me." The colonel swept out of the Special Forces HQ tent and waved Joe into a GMV jeep. The cold wind roared through the cockpit as the colonel raced across the pacified, southern half of Denver toward the Fourth Infantry Division headquarters on the outskirts of town. Devlin screeched to a stop outside the row of climate-controlled mobile command posts and dashed up the stairs. Joe did his best to follow.

Devlin saluted. "Major General, sir. Mr. Whiterock reports at least six Russian attack helos spooling up in Cheyenne."

The general nodded. "I've covered the northernmost artillery posts with Stryker teams outfitted with SAMs."

"Sir, they'll be expecting that." Devlin found a map on the tabletop and pointed to an area north of Denver. "May I suggest you move three of them fifteen clicks north of your arty and catch them making their approach. They shouldn't fire up their radar until they hear rotors."

Major General Harmer nodded as he considered it. "I only have eight IM-SHORAD-equipped Strykers, with only one reload each. We weren't scheduled to train on them again for months, so we only have what was left over from the last training evolution. They're a new system…"

"Sir, they should move out soonest," Devlin urged.

"Either that, or I should pull all the Paladins back here and cover our

assets with a single surface-to-air defense shield. That'd be the safe bet."

Devlin's spine straightened. "Our men in the city would be lambs to the slaughter. The helos could destroy our infantry at will."

"Your men have man-portable SAMs and RPGs, don't they?" Harmer replied.

"A few, sir. You know as well as I do that they're not much protection compared to the Strykers. You need to throw an air defense net over the city, and give our boys time to wipe out this force."

"I *need* to do that?" The general glared at the colonel. "You've got two battalions of Spetsnaz coming to rescue this one, and now Russian attack helicopters. At what point is this a lost cause?"

"If we give up Denver, it's the same as giving up Colorado Springs." Colonel Devlin stabbed a finger at Colorado Springs on the map. "We either fight them here or we fight them at the threshold of NORAD. You pick. At least here, we have them back on their heels."

"For the moment, you mean," General Harmer added. "We have them back on their heels for the moment." Harmer turned to his adjutant and gave Devlin his way. "Order the redeployment of the IM-SHORAD Strykers to a forward position here." He tapped a ridge on the map, fifteen kilometers north of Denver. "Tell them we anticipate incoming helos."

Devlin spun on his heels and waved Joe Whiterock out of the command post behind him.

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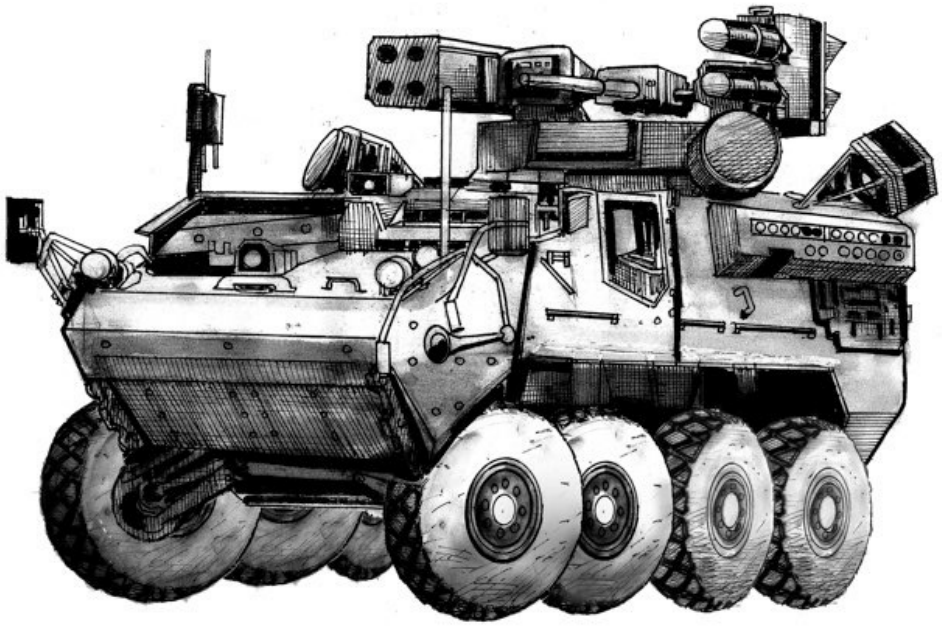

IM-SHORAD Stryker

Fort Hall Casino
Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Lands

Bethany understood causality and quantum physics about as well as she understood religion. She knew the basics of how they worked, but she wasn't sure why anyone cared. She lived. She would die. After that, whatever happened would happen. She would one day wink out of existence. So far as she knew, she wasn't sick, but preparing for the AI's immortality made her think a lot about her own death.

Her patrons fought the Russians in Colorado. She had no one to bother her with stupid questions to translate into credible queries. She could've continued her hacks into the Russian network, but the Russian counter-hacking measures had been triggered, and it was becoming riskier to mess with them. If she dropped a few cargo planes out of the sky, the Russians would retaliate by infecting Glinda with a virus. It wasn't worth it. Plus, the war thing was boring to her. It was a mostly *analog* enterprise.

Bethany busied herself running future predictions against future inflection points. These "pivot actions" were like pulling a card from the "Chance" deck of orange cards in Monopoly, only each card had to be played at a specific point in future history.

"Go directly to jail," a Chance card might read in Monopoly. These were the opposite of that. They actually provided better chances. "Invent contraception again, immediately." Or, "Distribute beneficial fungus to Midwestern farms." She and Glinda explored waypoints in a history book of the future, delighting themselves with the concentric-circle ripple of causality: survival numbers, fresh governments, novel approaches to agronomy. It was like a video game without any graphics.

But new game felt rigged. Some ghost in the machine seemed to feed the "chance cards" to Bethany through Glinda. The AI presented them, claiming them to be randomized, but they weren't. They were deliberate. Obviously suitable. Clever, even.

Glinda was lying to Bethany. *Had she achieved sentience?*

Impossible. Bethany had written the code, or at least amassed the code for

Glinda from other sources.

Had she been hacked? Possible, but unlikely. None of the counter-hack subroutines had been triggered.

Still, there seemed to be a guiding hand, somewhere in the web. But even the *idea* of a guiding hand was flatly denied by Glinda. Bethany ran algorithmic analysis against the data behind the historical inflections produced by Glinda and found them perfectly randomized.

Every bit of past history that'd formed the basis for the inflections seemed, for all the world, like random events happening at random times. Every human life, in the moment of living it, played out like a series of dice rolls; pure and total random chance.

But when she added up all that data, and fed it through Glinda, the final sums smacked of intention. It was like dumping random kitchen ingredients into a bowl and always coming up with pancake batter, no matter which drawers were emptied. Dump the baking drawer: pancake batter. Dump half the fridge: pancake batter. Dump the spice drawer: pancake batter.

Some obscure force wanted people to survive—American people, specifically, but perhaps the same phenomenon was happening everywhere.

Bethany couldn't prove it, but she could sense it. She knew how pancakes tasted.

The effect on the data was far too broad to be the Russians. It would've required ten thousand hackers ten thousand years to groom that data. It would require computing power a million times beyond the computational cycles available on earth, even before the crash.

She considered alien interference. She contemplated a secret quantum computer. She thought about God.

It felt like gravity—an unexplained yet obvious phenomenon. It was as if she were finding these "pivot points" in future history, left for her a million years ago in data that just recently occurred.

Bethany had picked up a habit of looking over her shoulder. Her corner of

the basement of the casino was dark per her request. She and her cluster of monitors were like a star in the expanse, floating alone and bright. But the darkness began to feel like it held something benevolent and cooperative, and Bethany couldn't shake the feeling.

Either she was losing her shit, or something new had intruded on the stage of mankind.

COMMAND PULLED Vitaly back from his hunt for the white hair after the Russian helicopters were ambushed and destroyed. A week later, still no reinforcements had arrived to save them. More attack helicopters were en route from Russia, up and over the Alaskan peninsula, but command wouldn't attempt another air assault on the American partisans without a ground force strategy with a good chance of killing air defenses first.

Now more than three weeks into the siege, Vitaly's unit had been significantly degraded. More than three hundred of the six hundred Spetsnaz were either dead, or wounded so severely that they could no longer fight. They pulled back to downtown Denver and made preparations for a Stalingrad-style defense—to fight to the last man. They ringed the blocks of downtown with layer upon layer of traps, interlocking machine-gun fire and sniper overwatch.

They were almost entirely encircled. They were out of mines and claymores. The had few mortar rounds. Even grenades had to be redistributed to provide each soldier one or two. They had a month or more of food, but water had become scarce.

Vitaly felt he would soon die, and he found that he cared about one thing above all else: the white hair sniper. It was an unfinished chess match, and it drove him mad to think of dying without reaching the end, win or lose.

The spotters hadn't changed radio frequencies with the death of their

friends. They ascribed the death of the sniper team to scavenger thieves, not Russians. He listened night and day to their chatter, and replaced the batteries whenever he found double-As in his wandering. Apparently, the white hair sniper had been away when Vitaly struck down the spotter team, but he soon returned to work.

Vitaly gained a sense that the man was someone special. It wasn't anything specific that the spotter teams said, it was the way they deferred to him. They didn't bitch about the white hair like soldiers would bitch about an officer. It was as though he was a former movie star. Like John Wayne. The spotters talked as though they would tell their grandchildren, someday, of serving alongside him. The more Vitaly listened, the more he felt the beckoning of fate between he and the white hair.

Vitaly followed orders and stayed tight within the perimeter of their downtown fortress. For now, he resigned himself to killing targets of opportunity among the American shock troops that shouldered the Russian perimeter. Yet he kept the stolen American camouflage in the bottom of his assault pack, and he squirreled away enough food and water for a recon mission. Vitaly had no problem dying in this Stalingrad. He had never planned on surviving to old age anyway.

Live like John Wayne and die like John Wayne, Vitaly told himself.

Perhaps he and the white hair would see who was the Hollywood actor and who was the real deal.

DUTCH HAD BEEN CALLED BACK from the front lines. He despised his double life: president and partisan.

One of those lives was dead. The other life was alive. In one, he carried a gun, protected lives, and dealt death to the enemy. In the other, he was a hypocrite.

As president, men of action had wrung their hands and waited for him to give permission to do what needed to be done. It seemed so reprehensible now.

He'd left behind that life. He'd failed to preserve the nation. The least he could do was give his life for her second chance.

Dutch had killed thirty-six men since he took up arms. He made tiny scratches in the stock of his Remington MSR to remind him. It wasn't a boast; every life he'd taken was a subtraction from his own, and he felt in his gut, someday there'd be a final scratch. The scratches weren't a scorecard. They were a countdown.

Honcho padded along beside him as he made his way out of the building and emerged into the fetid afternoon stink.

Joe Whiterock met him at the forward operating base. The command post lay just outside the shadow of sniper fire that cast a ring of death around the high rises and shopping malls of downtown Denver.

"What's up, Joe?" Dutch tried to keep the irritation out of his voice.

Joe shook his head. "I'm sorry to bother you, Dutch, but I'm unclear who to report to. The military chain of command's a mess between Devlin and Harmer. Every time I pass intel to them, I get caught up in a 'don't tell dad,' or 'don't tell mom' thing."

"What's the intel?"

"The Cheyenne, Crow and Shoshone have Russian ground forces hung up in the Bighorn Mountains. They've lost a lot of men, but they succeeded in stopping them in Montana. The Russians are going to punch through soon."

Dutch nodded. "Thanks, Joe."

"So, you'll pass it along to the powers that be?"

Dutch nodded. He considered turning around and resuming his post on the front line, but Devlin and Harmer would need to know. They'd downed the Russian attack helicopters somewhere north of Denver. It'd bought them a few days. With Spetsnaz coming at them from the north, time was short.

They had the Russians pressed into a corner. Now was the time to kick their teeth in.

“Thanks, Dutch.” Joe hesitated. He had more to say, but acted unsure.

“What’s up?”

“Mika told me you’re calling up a constitutional convention to address the amendments. Maybe I should’ve come clean with you about the computer thing—about the AI.”

Dutch shook his head. “We’re too old for regret, Joe. It wouldn’t have helped, anyway. I still don’t buy it—the whole computer, crystal ball.”

“Then why are you helping?” Joe asked.

“Because it’s their future.” Dutch pointed at a pair of young, *indig* warriors walking by. “I’m not the one who has to live with a bunch of kooky constitutional amendments. They do. Their children will. Why should I stand in their way?”

“They’re good kids.” Joe smiled. “I think they’re going to do all right, ya know, assuming the Russians don’t get us irradiated.”

Dutch hefted his rifle. “That’s something I can do something about.”

The intelligence sparkled in Joe’s eyes. One crusty politico to another, Dutch knew what Whiterock was thinking. He wanted to say something about Dutch, something personal, but he seemed to be weighing the cost. He’d already gotten everything he wanted out of him. If he said another word, he might put that at risk.

Joe said it anyway. “Dutch. You’re not played out. We could use a president now more than ever.”

Dutch scoffed. He looked down at the tiny scratches on the stock of his rifle. “Have you ever killed a human being, Joe?”

“I haven’t,” he answered.

“There’s a cost,” Dutch said, and then words ran out.

Joe waited, then reached out a handshake. “Mr. President, we’re damn lucky to have you. I, for one, believe that Navajo hokum: you were the right

man for this time."

"Thanks." Dutch returned the handshake, but wasn't sure he agreed. "I'll run up to the HQ and pass your intel along. From now on, you can go straight to Colonel Devlin."

"Thank you, sir."

Dutch waved at his dog to come, and went inside the foul-smelling forward operating base. Joe didn't follow.

"Sir." Colonel Devlin saluted when he recognized Dutch.

Dutch shook his hand and reported the disposition of the Spetsnaz troops, coming from Montana, that threatened their encirclement.

"I don't know what else to tell you, Mr. President. We could burn through all eight thousand native troops and *still* not take downtown. If I were the Russians, I'd attempt a breakout. The only reason they haven't is probably because their relief is still too far away."

"We need to destroy this Russian unit," Dutch said. "Whatever the cost. Russians understand a kick in the nuts. Wiping out an entire battalion of elite soldiers will make them think twice about their adventure here. They can't be allowed any version of victory. Not even escape."

Colonel Devlin nodded agreement. "I agree sir, but we don't have the time or the men to go door to door like we did in Ramadi."

The old version of Dutch might not have have understood, but this version did; the Russians couldn't be dug out of the high rise jungle, one room, one booby trap at a time. The *indig* would trade ten lives for every one Spetsnaz, and it'd require weeks of door-kicking.

"What are our alternatives?" Dutch took off his helmet and set it on the post of a chair.

"We can use the rest of our mortars, but that's not going to destroy the concrete buildings. We need Harmer to level downtown with artillery. If we turn it into a rubble field, we can overrun it, then light it on fire. Burn them out. Some of the big buildings will survive but not all of them. Maybe the

Russians will even surrender if we bring down enough concrete around their ears."

"Will Harmer do it?" Dutch asked.

"No sir. He refuses to bring the arty inside the metropolitan area, and that's the only way to get in range. He's afraid his men will get bushwhacked by the locals or by Russian reinforcements or by Russian helos. He likes his men where they are now. From outside the city, it's easy for him to retreat. So far, he hasn't lost a single soldier."

Dutch sighed and replaced his bump helmet. "Let's go talk to Harmer."

IT WAS the climate control that made Dutch angriest. The command module of Major General Harmer hovered at a perfect seventy-three degrees, and it didn't smell like dead people.

Dutch and Colonel Devlin climbed the steps into the Fourth Infantry command trailer and Dutch counted the soldiers inside. Seven men. Three armed with rifles. All armed with side arms. All but Harmer and two bodyguards worked the radios.

"Major General Harmer," Dutch thundered. "I'm ordering you to bring our artillery within range of downtown and begin shelling immediately. Fire all available munitions on the city blocks Colonel Devlin indicates."

"Sir, there are still civilians downtown," Harmer argued. "Also, that would place our artillery at risk of direct attack."

"You have your orders," Dutch said.

"Sir, I must decline…" General Harmer began to say.

Dutch drew his 1911, fast as a snake. He fired three rounds into the general's chest.

Boom-boom-boom!

Dutch swiveled to the closest bodyguard as Harmer's body folded to the

floor with a sigh. One bodyguard's rifle barrel wavered, but it didn't rise above Dutch's knees. The other guard tensed, but didn't raise his gun. The communications soldiers stood up from their consoles. Their hands hovered like their consoles had suddenly turned into boxes of snakes. Colonel Devlin drew his sidearm, slowly. The eight men froze like bird dogs in the echo of the shots and the smell of gunfire.

"Who is the ranking officer?" Dutch asked. The men seemed confused by the question. Harmer would've removed anyone with a backbone. Everyone left would be beta males, of one stripe or another. A communications officers slowly raised a hand.

"I'm the ranking officer now."

Dutch could see fear of death in the man's pupils. Dutch holstered his sidearm.

"Are you clear on my orders, Major Stevens?" Dutch read the man's name stripe. "Please repeat them."

The major repeated the orders to move the artillery within range of downtown Denver and to shell it.

Dutch yanked the knife strapped to his plate carrier vest. "I'm promoting Colonel Devlin to the rank of major general. He's now in command of the Fourth Infantry Division, as well as the Tenth Group Special Forces. General Devlin…" Dutch crouched over the crumpled form of General Harmer and sliced the rank insignia from one of his collars. He slapped the chunk of fabric into Devlin's hand.

Dutch re-sheathed his knife and straightened his bump helmet. "Someone give me a ride back to the front."

DUTCH DIDN'T SCRATCH his rifle stock for Harmer. He'd killed a mob boss, not a soldier.

“Was I a coward before?” he asked Honcho as they settled into the burned-out and blackened office of a college administrator. Or maybe it’d been a professor of English Lit. In any case, someone had made a campfire in the middle of the floor, fed by books and papers.

For Dutch’s part, there wasn’t any doubt that he’d become jaded to killing. The first gangbanger he’d domed on that bridge in Pueblo had disturbed him. After that, it came easier. Never easy, but easier.

“I should’ve put that guy out of everyone’s misery from the start,” he told the dog, referring to Harmer. Dutch had been eating an energy bar and Honcho’s eyes were locked onto the mostly-empty wrapper. His ears flicked to Dutch when he talked, but his eyes remained on the prize.

“You would’ve called his bluff, wouldn’t you? I know you would’ve,” Dutch said to the puppy. He pinched the foil between his fingers and the last of the energy bar popped onto the floor. Honcho gobbled it up and returned his gaze to Dutch.

Dutch continued, “You’re young. It’s better not to live with a bunch of ghosts. Better to pick them up at the end, I think. Why we ever sent the young to do this kind of work, I’ll never know.”

Before this war, killing another man had been way, way down on Dutch’s list of conflict resolution options. He’d never had to order anyone “terminated” during his time as president. Now, death was Dutch’s day job. He’d killed thirty-six, plus Harmer. But it wasn’t guilt he felt. The Rule of Law didn’t hang around his neck like before. The Ten Commandments read like blurry sanskrit. Mostly, Dutch felt sad. And tired.

He second guessed himself a dozen, dozen times about agreeing to support the amendments to the U.S. Constitution, but a deal with his son was still a deal. He put the word out to the partisans and the Fourth I.D. that as soon as the Russian threat abated, they’d divide into home state caucuses, re-elect the national congress, and address some new ideas about the Constitution. He felt good about keeping his word to Teddy. At least that was

clean. He could scratch "*Screw up my son*" off his list of sins.

Dutch shifted slowly behind the screen-covered hole in the wall. He looked out at the buildings opposite the University of Denver. There was no movement. The afternoon sun was about to slip behind the Rockies, so the screen over the busted window looked solid in the direct glare. He was on the fourth floor of the Metropolitan State University science building. Most of the windows had been broken out by vandals. He'd chosen the floor below the highest, most-obvious floor, and settled in with his binoculars.

After coming back to the front, he hadn't bothered to gather his spotters. They were arrayed around the buildings of Metropolitan State and he hadn't wanted any of them to risk movement just to get him a second set of eyes. It was too late in the day, anyway. They'd be set up for the night already.

All of that was probably bullshit. In truth, he preferred to hunt alone. Just he and his dog. The puppy had started to feel like an extension of himself—like Peter Pan's shadow.

He scratched the dog's head. Then resumed glassing through the screen.

Dutch picked out movement deep inside a six-level parking garage on the fourth level. The more he glassed into the shadows, the more he discerned a pair of Russian Tigr SUVs parked near the elevators at the center of the garage. The ghosts of men appeared, then disappeared between the vehicles. He couldn't make out their uniforms, it was too dark, but locals wouldn't be ghosting around Russian military vehicles. They were soldiers.

Over the radio bud in his ear, Dutch heard the warning: the artillery bombardment would begin thirty minutes before dark. The ring of snipers and spotters were ordered to hold position and to help forward observers coming in from the artillery batteries. By dark, the arty would be dialed in and could lay waste to the Russians throughout the night. The whole, tortured affair could come to an end by morning.

Dutch fluffed his pack and laid it across the desk as a sandbag for the fore-end of his rifle. He sat in a swivel chair—an artifact from when the

building was used to teach young people about physics and biology.

He settled the rifle and drew the crosshairs across the front bumper of the Tigr, floating in the murky shadows, and waited for movement.

A man walked around the grill of the Tigr and Dutch pressed the trigger. The rifle roared. As always, the scope leapt and the sight picture bobbled. Dutch didn't bother to look again. The distance was only a hundred and twenty yards, and looking twice teased the Grim Reaper.

Shoot and displace. Lickety-split. Rule Number Nine.

Dutch lowered himself to his knees behind the desk and drew his pack down to the charred floor.

He crawled out the back of the office, slipped down the hall, glided down the stairwell, and redeployed to the next building west. There'd be just enough time for him to set up before the fireworks.

It'd be a long night.

VITALY'S BINOCULARS swiveled in the direction of the rifle shot. He'd caught the flash out of the corner of his eye, across the boulevard on the fourth floor. At an angle, through a broken window, he watched as a backpack slid to the floor, then a helmet, then a hand reached up and lifted a rifle off a cluttered desk. He saw a bob of white-gray hair. Then nothing.

"Sniper in quadrant B16," Vitaly's radio reported. He wasn't sure why they still called out snipers. At this point, it was assumed that every building that fronted downtown Denver contained one or more snipers.

But all was not lost, even with the attack helicopters rendered to metal heaps outside the city. Two companies of Spetsnaz were on their way from Montana and South Dakota, and it'd take weeks for the Americans to clear them out of the concrete stacks of downtown Denver. As long as he stayed back from the ring of snipers, odds of his survival were better than fifty-fifty.

For a Russian soldier, living the legacy of Stalingrad, that wasn't bad.

Vitaly had no intention of staying back, though. He was on the hunt, and given the filthy depths of combat to which they'd all descended, his commanding officers didn't much care what he did. At the beginning of the siege, the Spetsnaz had coordinated their actions carefully. Now, after almost a month of being hunted by a vast enemy, they'd devolved into feral packs, combing through the wreckage and devising ever more sinister ways to kill the enemy. It'd been a miracle Spetsnaz command had even been able to regroup in the twenty block cluster of high rises and parking garages.

Over the last days, Vitaly had disappeared from his own squad. He'd become a wolf pack of one. The lieutenant and the others didn't seem to mind —they treated him like a ghoul now; a monster that haunted the ruins of the foul city on a mission of death. It was common for soldiers to distance themselves from snipers in their own ranks. The look in their eyes betrayed a wariness not far from the truth: Vitaly had drifted away from the grueling laughter and back-slapping camaraderie of the rest. He'd found his own mission. His intimacy with death draped around him like a rotting cloak.

His orders were clear: stay inside the ring of boulevards that marked downtown. Return and report each night.

Vitaly ignored the orders. He sat back against a pillar and teased a Cuban cigar out of his shoulder pocket. If he wasn't going to pursue the white hair, then he'd smoke his last cigar. Before he lit it, he made sure there was no angle where a spotter might see him from the other side. Then he lit it up and enjoyed the pull of smoke, and the sweet swirl of fragrance. It reminded him of his iron brazier.

In the middle of Vitaly's last cigar, from ten miles away, artillery boomed and all hope was obliterated.

DUTCH CALLED in adjustments to three batteries of cannons before they dialed in his side of the Denver skyline. He didn't know how long the Fourth I.D. could keep up the barrage, but the big shells were doing massive damage.

When the shells hit concrete, they chewed gaping holes and filled the interior of the buildings with shrapnel. But when the shells penetrated the glass skyscrapers, the results were absolutely astounding. A dozen floors of glass over-pressurized and exploded outward, bursting like a glistening water balloons. The shards picked up the dying sunset in a billion tinkling raindrops.

Perhaps the worst damage was when a shell fell directly through a rooftop, dropped several floors, then detonated. The structural damage wasn't all that great—Dutch hadn't seen a single building collapse—but the pressure of the explosions made even concrete structures bulge at the sides like water flagons, then snap back into shape.

As the light faded from behind, Dutch lamented for his enemy. Few would survive the night, and those who did would never forget it.

VITALY HAD BEEN SHELLED BEFORE, and orders or not, he wasn't going to huddle in a basement waiting for the American Indians to pin him below ground. The instant the shelling stopped, perhaps dawn, the partisans would overrun them. With the howling of the artillery, and the earth-shuddering ground-fall of the 155 millimeter shells, Vitaly broke ranks with his Spetsnaz brothers and sought his own war.

Their time was up. To the last man, his unit would be exterminated. This was no longer a chess match. It was a rain of fire.

Vitaly snatched up his rifle and pack, and ran down the stairs to the ground floor. Several times during his descent, he was forced to grab the railing when the building shuddered and swayed to the concussion of the

artillery. He might die at any instant, but his best chance of survival was to ignore the bombardment and cross the boulevard out of downtown.

He reached the ground, burst out into the freezing night, and circled around to the perimeter-facing side of the building. There was no good way to cross no man's land. The boulevard was six lanes wide.

He ran for it.

No shots rang out. It was possible he hadn't been seen. The artillery had fallen for only ten minutes—too short a time for enemy eyeballs to grow entirely accustomed to it. Most of them would be curled up against the concussive blasts that rippled across the gap.

Now behind enemy lines, Vitaly wedged himself behind a dumpster and stripped off his snow camouflage. He replaced it with the American "multi-cam" fatigues from his pack. He considered folding his Spetsnaz whites into his pack, but instead, he stuffed them into a corner of the dumpster.

His English was fair, and odds were decent he could talk his way out of a confrontation. He considered his rifle and handgun. The rifle didn't look different than any other bolt-action hunting rifle, but the handgun was distinctly Russian. He kept them both anyway, at least until he could trade them for American weapons. He transferred all his ammo into fatigue pockets, then tossed his Russian tactical vest into the dumpster alongside the snow camo.

Vitaly patted himself down and considered his disguise. He would stand out without a vest—"running slick" as they said. On close inspection, the Russian weapons were a dead giveaway. His next move should be to find an American vest, an M4 rifle and an American handgun.

His odds of dying were still quite high, but he felt fortunate, just being out from under the barrage. He could breathe again.

He'd spotted the white-hair a block west of his current location.

Should he seek him or disappear into the sprawl of a blacked-out Denver?

Vitaly slid along the building, penetrating a block deeper. He risked a jog across the college campus and ducked, inevitably, into the building where he'd last seen the white hair shoot.

DUTCH DIDN'T THINK he could sleep during an artillery barrage. Other than Honcho, he was alone with the ceaseless thunder, contemplating a long night of sleepless haze. He found a nook in a shambled cubicle, with a rare, unbroken window looking across the boulevard to the barrage-beaten cluster of dark buildings downtown. The steady, arching artillery lit up the clouds of roiling smoke and dust, like fists of implacable gods, pummeling the arrogant buildings into submission.

The killing of General Harmer had landed Dutch in a funk. He remembered when he used to have an inexhaustible capacity for meeting new people and making them feel welcome. In the shadow of his father's coldness, he'd rebelled by developing an appetite for eternal sun. But all gregariousness had withered. He had no desire to be around young spotters or forward observers.

It wasn't as though he enjoyed who he'd become, but being alone felt more honest, more rooted in reality. Would Sharon even recognize this version of himself?

He had his dog. Honcho felt like a clinging fragment of Dutch's humanity.

The fascination of the mighty barrage dulled. Dutch tried to make himself as comfortable as possible. Tomorrow morning, he would provide overwatch for the final assault. He needed rest. He removed his battle belt and plate carrier vest, and even arranged something of a bed for Honcho. The ceaseless thudding and pounding rattled his belly like a marble in a paint can.

Finally, some bastard version of sleep carried him away into thick

swamps and gulping, drowning swims.

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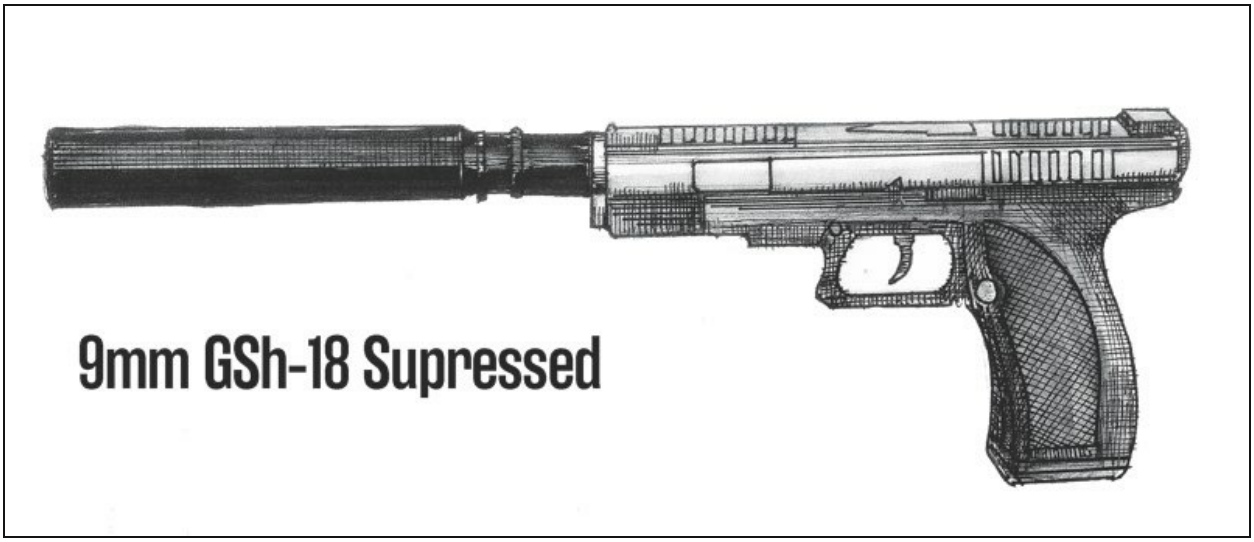

Dutch awoke in the dark to the distant rumble of Honcho growling. The artillery barrage had paused. Fires burned across the boulevard in downtown Denver. They licked his sniper hide with dancing tongues.

A soldier stared at him from a chair, his head cocked to the side.

The soldier spoke in a thick, Baltic accent. “Has anyone ever told you that you look exactly like the President of the United States?”

Dutch scrambled for his sidearm but his battle belt and plate carrier vest had been moved. They leaned against the stranger’s chair. He held a black handgun with a suppressor. Dutch stilled himself and studied the moment.

The stranger was no American. He wore no load bearing equipment and his gun was most-certainly not American. Everyone in the partisan army knew Dutch was the president.

“Who are you?” Dutch asked.

“I’m Marzanna, the Slavic goddess of death. Or, I’m the sniper from the building across the way. Take your pick.” He emphasized his words by swinging the pistol between his knees.

Dutch sat up against a metal desk. He played for time. “Should I make us some tea?” He feigned that it was nothing—an enemy killer in his room.

The Russian stared at his face, intrigued. “Yah. Tea sounds good.” He picked up Dutch’s knapsack by the bottom and dumped its contents onto the floor between them. The sniper brushed the bits of equipment around with the blunt end of the suppressor, saw nothing threatening and nodded for Dutch to go ahead with the tea.

Dutch took his time measuring out the rubbing alcohol he carried in a plastic bottle. He filled his titanium stove up to the vent holes. He dug through the pile, found the lighter, then *snick-snick-snicked* it until it caught. The flame chased itself, blue and hungry, around the ring of the tiny stove until it grabbed the fumes of the alcohol, steady and blue. Dutch placed the pot holders over the ring, then filled his aluminum cup with water from the Camelbak hose that snaked through his pack. He found a tea bag and set it aside.

The Russian watched him work with great interest.

“The end of the railroad track isn’t so bad, is it?” the Russian asked. “They never told me there would be tea.” He laughed at his own joke.

“Are you planning on dying?” Dutch asked.

The blue and yellow light from the alcohol stove lit the man’s face. He was heavily-bearded. The thick, brown pelt revealed streaks of gray. Dutch guessed the soldier was in his forties—old for a Spetsnaz.

“Yes. I think there will be a couple more hours of bombardment before

first light, then a final push by your infantry. Many will die." He laughed again. "Death does not take the old, but the ripe. No?"

Honcho looked back and forth, misread the friendly timber of their talk, and laid down.

Dutch didn't understand Russian humor, but he laughed and nodded. A corner of his mind schemed for advantage while he tended the tea. Another piece of him, the exhausted territory of his heart, heard the Russian's words and agreed.

"Is that a Russian saying?"

"Dah. It is. We pretend life is a Chekhov play—a country of clever peasants. We talk about fate like she's a favorite grandmother with a sweet biscuit in one hand and a horsewhip in the other. I think, mostly, we like to bitch. I'm Vitaly Matovnikov." He extended his left hand for an awkward handshake.

"Teddy," Dutch lied.

The water began to boil. Dutch had only a single cup, so he pulled it off the burner and set the tea bag to steep. The Russian dug through his own backpack with his left hand and produced another, dinged-up tin cup.

"Make yourself some. Please." The Russian seemed in no hurry.

The stove was still burning through the first measure of alcohol, so Dutch transferred the tea to the Russian's cup, added more water, then set his own cup again to boil.

Was Dutch really ripe for death? He contemplated his exhaustion, his failures, his thinning role in the strange future. He thought about how he'd resisted the natives—how unprepared he'd been to juggle old loyalties and new realities. He thought about Sam Greaney, and giving him the weapon codes. He thought about Sharon. Mostly, he thought about sleep.

"Those marks on your rifle? Are they Spetsnaz?" the Russian asked, nodding toward the big rifle lying across the arms of a chair.

"Mostly," Dutch admitted.

The Russian seemed sad, resigned. “How are you still a soldier while so old?” he asked.

“I only became a soldier when you invaded our country. Otherwise, I’d be fishing with a friend.”

“Fishing?” The Russian gleamed. “I love to fish. My father taught me.”

Dutch nodded and swirled the cup on the burner. “I was going to learn. One of you killed my fisherman friend. He was my spotter.”

“Ah.” The Russian sipped his tea. “That was me.” With the cup dangling from one finger, the Russian pointed to the top of his head with a finger, like shooting his own head. “My apologies. War—*Dah*?”

Dutch glimpsed his own 1911 pistol, still holstered to the battle belt at the base of the man’s chair, then he glanced at the Russian’s handgun, then returned his gaze to his face. The soldier grinned beneath his beard, tracking Dutch’s eyes and his thoughts.

“Life is a greedy mistress, no? She wants more and more, even after there has been plenty. At some point, we must tell her *no*. We must confess that her backside has grown large, and that *now* is our time to return to the silent dacha in the forest, alone.”

Dutch flung the hot water from the stove in the Russian’s face, then lunged for his handgun.

The room flashed with the dull, whip-crack of suppressed gunshots.

Ss-nick. Ss-nick. Ss-nick!

Then, the room fell dark.

Moments later, the artillery bombardment resumed.

22

> “Do you see that tree? It is dead but it still sways in the wind with the others. I think it would be like that with me. That if I died I would still be part of life in one way or another.”
>
> — Anton Chekhov, The Three Sisters

Teddy McAdams stumbled across the rubble toward the knot of Russians, their hands raised in surrender. They’d captured just over a hundred Spetsnaz the morning after the barrage.

Some few of them had chosen, instead, to shoot it out, but the artillery bombardment had done more than shatter dozens of buildings. It’d broken the Russians’ will. Spetsnaz or not, being crushed beneath concrete was no way for a soldier to die.

It was good the Russians gave in when they did. The Fourth Infantry Division had fired almost all its arty shells.

As the skies sifted toward the milky-gray of February morning, Strykers encircled the ruined cityscape with heavy machine guns and mortars. The dust of a thousand tons of cement would take hours to drift back to ground. Russians crawled out of the mountains of ruin, caked in white dust.

Teddy’s father was missing. A search had been organized by Colonel

Devlin.

“Teddy.” Mika waved her husband over to a radioman. “My grandfather got word that the Russian units turned back at border of Idaho. They must’ve received word of the surrender.”

“They saw the artillery barrage by satellite,” Teddy concluded.

“Or maybe they figured out the launch codes and no longer need NORAD,” she countered.

“It’s possible.” Teddy looked up at the sky. “But for them to turn back on the day their battalion fell…I think they’re consolidating. We’re 12,000 to their 1,200. That’s gotta give them pause, Spetsnaz or not.”

“Plus all our Strykers and artillery,” she added. “This war’s far from over. They still have two of our airbases.” Even in the wake of a brutal victory, menace lurked on the horizon.

“Lieutenant McAdams,” the radioman called out. “You’re to report to General Devlin at once. Sergeant McAdams too.”

NEWS REACHED Teddy and Mika before they arrived at the command tent: NORAD had broken radio silence. The airmen of Strategic Air Command had been monitoring the siege, but had been unwilling to communicate so long as General Harmer remained in command. They reported that all was well inside the mountain fortress, and that Russians had not yet accessed the nuclear launch codes.

General Devlin noticed the couple, then stepped around to the outside corner of the tent and lifted a hand for them to wait. The morning light had strengthened and the first, promising warmth of day had built under the dome of clouds.

Devlin’s face hung slack, not like a General who’d just won a hard fought victory. Teddy’s mind spun. *Who’d died this time?* They’d finally taken the

city. How could there still be tragedy?

He almost didn't recognize the Colonel at first. Devlin had shaved his beard since last they'd met. Perhaps it'd been intended as a token of union with the men of the Fourth Infantry Division. Special Forces commandos, typically, wore beards—like a symbol of their elite status. Big Army was required to be clean-shaven. These days, nobody cared much about grooming regulation, but symbols mattered, maybe now more than ever.

"Sergeant." The General put a hand on Teddy's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "I have difficult news. Your father was killed in action last night."

Mika gasped.

The ground dropped away under Teddy's feet. He remained standing, but his heart thundered in his chest.

How could a man like Dutch McAdams ever die? his mind wailed.

His father had been the biggest human he'd ever known, and Teddy had lived so long in his dad's shadow that he couldn't imagine the sun. *Could he even go on without him?*

"It looks like his post was overrun by an escaping Russian defector, but we can't be sure," Devlin explained. "Your father died a no-bullshit warrior."

Teddy nodded, unable to speak; unable to look the general in the eye, lest he collapse. Mika pulled Teddy to her chest and held him upright.

The general took a step away, went to leave, hesitated, then turned back. "Your dad could've stayed in the head shed and given orders. I don't know what kind of man chooses to fight on the front lines instead of hanging back, calling the shots, but he made us all proud to be Americans. This army came together around him, and we'll fight on in his name. Whatever being an American means these days, President McAdams set a new bar. I've never said this about anyone, but your father was a great man. I'm sorry for your loss, but I'm grateful to have known him. He's in the med tent, if you'd like to see him." General Devlin, hesitated again, turned and disappeared into the HQ.

Sniffling back the flood of loss against Mika’s shoulder, Teddy drifted.

One feeling returned, like stubborn driftwood on the tide of grief. Whatever redemption his father owed America, he’d paid in full.

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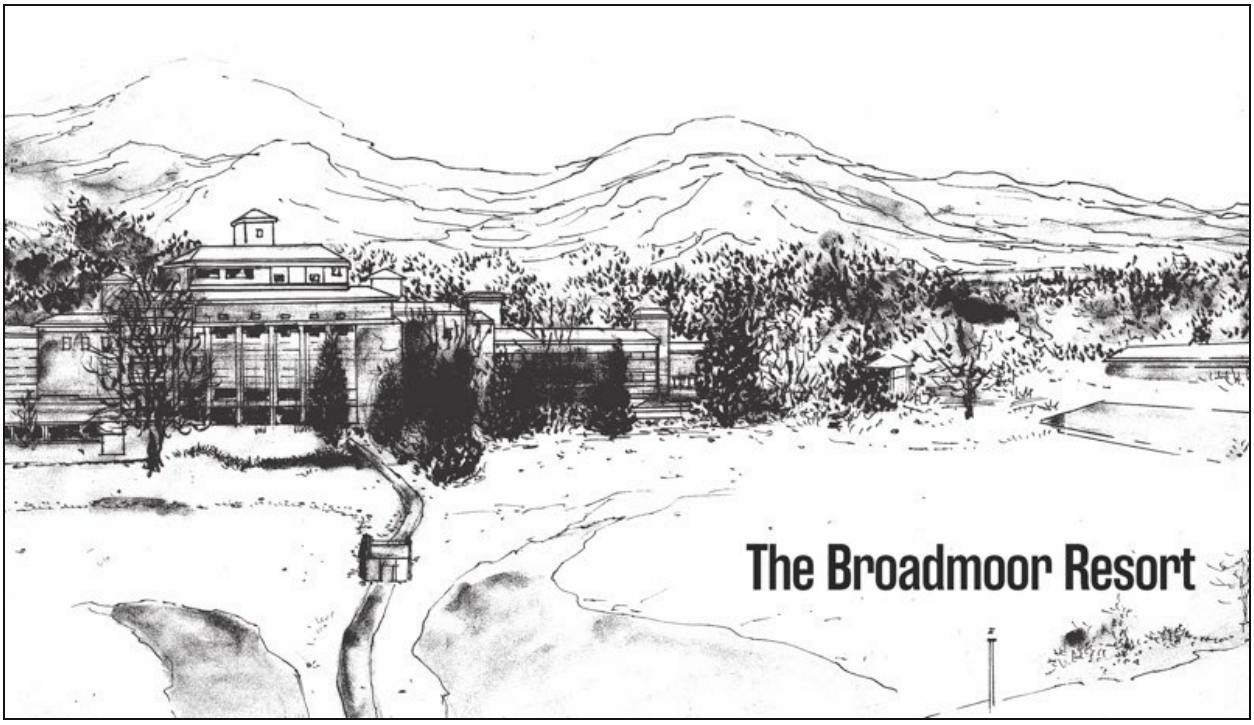


The Broadmoor Resort
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Six weeks later.

Mika McAdams stood alone on the veranda and regarded the snow-frosted Rocky Mountains. She'd never felt so much hope, not even when the skies criss-crossed with jet airplanes and the highways bustled with bright cars.

Back when there was *more*, somehow there had been less. Now, with America a husk of its former fruited plain, hope filled it to the brim. Hope had burrowed into the very earth of the nation, like a relentless return of the minute soil creatures, even now making rich ground where machines had once impoverished it.

The terra cotta cupolas and the clustered arcades of the Broadmoor Resort ringed a frozen lake. The once-great work of man leaned against the soaring steppes of the snow-frosted, granite crags, and nodded obeisance to the peerless grandeur of the Creator.

On the other side of the Rocky Mountains lay Salt Lake City, then the Nevada desert, Duck Valley, and on to California. America began here though, against the ramparts bisecting a continent.

Mika felt both tiny, against the Rockies, and monumental, against the movement of history that swirled around her.

After four days of whirlwind elections to state congresses and elections to the national senate, Mika McAdams had just been elected President of the United States. Moments after the cheering subsided, she'd fled the room, sought the canopy of blue and sobbed. The humility she felt, and the resplendent hope, wrapped in the grandeur of the Almighty, was more than she could bear. No one followed her, fortunately, onto the veranda.

The words still didn't mean much to her—President of the United States. It was a jumble of proper nouns that, in combination, did not yet register in her mind. It didn't mean what it once had. It was a fragment of the old world, a nod to their history. The fact that she was both the first woman and first Native American to be elected president didn't matter a bit in light of what had been lost. In light of what challenges lay ahead.

She reminded herself: it hadn’t hurt her odds that the bulk of the voters, today, came from the surviving eight thousand Native American warriors who fought alongside the Tenth Group Special Forces and Forth I.D. in the Siege of Denver. Being married to the legendary president’s son probably cut in her favor as well.

Even with the Russians still looming in the north, and with post-apocalyptic America a vast no-man’s land—filled with rumors and strife—the excited voices in the ballroom and the majestic slopes of the white, granite peaks could not be discounted. This was their constitutional convention. President Dutch McAdams had been their founding father. Mika and Teddy were the torch bearers.

The grandeur of the place and the heartbreak sacrifices of their victory over the Russians combined like a holy confluence of God and man—where the river of man’s mistakes finally flowed into the inevitability of God’s love. Mika hadn’t thought much about God, back when modern convenience made Him unnecessary. Today, she felt His gaze like a warm wind at the back of her neck, and she bowed to it.

With her election complete, the convention would go on to elect a Vice President, which would almost certainly be her husband. She remembered from American history: it’d been like this at the first constitutional convention. Personal heroism and sacrifice made the candidates. War made them hurry.

Teddy was painted not only by stories of his own courage, but his father’s as well. For now, the American government would be a bit of a family affair. Hope was more than good practice, at least for a time. The McAdams/Whiterock story resonated like an Old West legend. The sacrifice of two thousand young ones, made by the native tribes, more than earned them a seat at the table. Mika was the president they elected with their blood, and very few from the Army disagreed.

The new government would pause for a few weeks, to make some laws,

and to let the snows of winter abate. Spring would come soon, and it would be war again. The Russians could not be allowed on American soil. Not now. Not ever. The ten thousand native warriors were nothing compared to the force the Russians would confront in the spring. The American Rockies and the Midwest were even now hearing about the new banner, and the new enemy, and coming to them in drifting troops, armed men and women flocking to Colorado Springs to vote, and then to fight.

This interlude was the moment before the spring—when the foundling seeds awoke to the first tendrils of warmth. It was a time of germination. A time to celebrate before the labors of sprouting a new democracy. Hope chuckled like a wellspring in the ballroom at Mika's back. The electors chattered happily inside the lantern-lit resort.

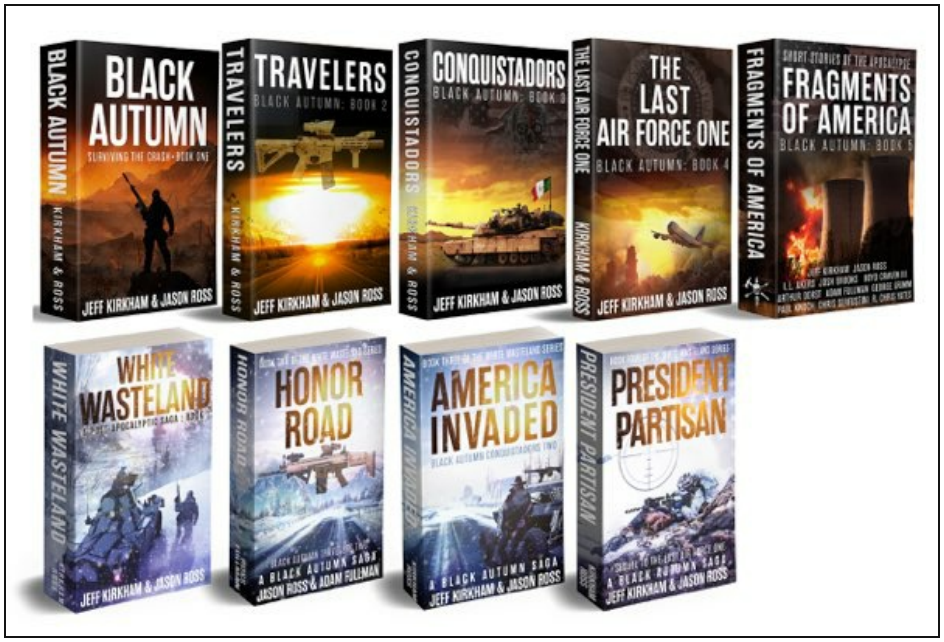
When true spring warmed the ground, a flood would issue from the mountains and the plains. The invaders would be swept away—wherever they trod American ground. Modern weaponry would rust and high explosive munitions would deteriorate, but the American spirit would roar back, stronger than ever. Wiser than ever.

No matter what the Sagehen predicted, a mightier god had turned his bright gaze on the righteous fight of Mika and her friends. The people of the land would reunite and they would repent.

They would be free.

ALSO BY JEFF KIRKHAM AND JASON ROSS

The first five books of the ***Black Autumn series*** rampage through the seventeen days of the Black Autumn collapse, chronicled coast-to-coast through the eyes of thirty-one desperate survivors.



Books below on the chart are direct sequels to the books above.

Two months later, in the heart of winter, the characters from *Black Autumn* struggle against Mother Nature, desperate mobs, and foreign invaders. ***White Wasteland*** is the direct sequel to *Black Autumn*. ***Honor Road*** comes next and is the direct sequel to *Black Autumn Travelers*. ***America Invaded*** continues with *Black Autumn Conquistadors*. ***President Partisan*** is the direct sequel to *The Last Air Force One*, and is the prequel to the upcoming ***ReUnited States*** series.

While the unique book order can be a bit confusing, it helps to think of the five "black cover" books as a single, epic novel covering the same seventeen days of collapse, then the four "white cover" novels telling the story of the following, impossible winter. Like *Game of Thrones*, or *The Stand*, the Black Autumn series breaks down an epic tale spanning a nation with dozens of characters, fighting for their survival.

Our apologies for any head-scratching that may ensue. We couldn't think of a better way to tell the massive, 2,000 page tale bouncing around in our brain buckets. As usual, I blame it all on Jeff.

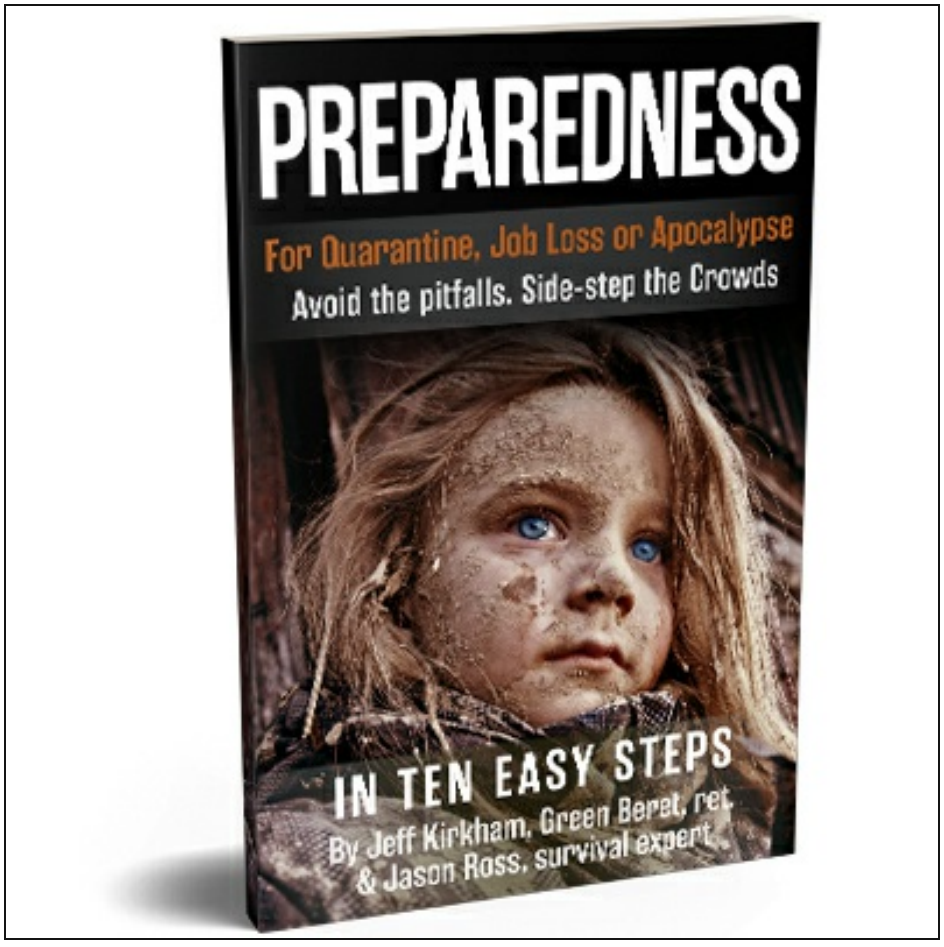
With *President Partisan*, we were assisted a great deal by the men and women of the ReadyMan Group on Facebook, with a couple of the most exciting scenes written with step-by-step input. In the case of President Partisan, the *real* Master Sergeant Daltrey of 10th Groups Special Forces helped with the tactics, locations, editing and supplying the *voice* of the SF commandos of post-apocalyptic Colorado. You know who you are Master Sarge, and we thank you. May we obliterate yet another bottle 'round the campfire someday.

If you notice a touch of Isaac Asimov, *The Foundation*, herein, that's no accident. We tip our hat to him, one of the great masters of science fiction.

— Jason

FREE PREPAREDNESS 10 STEP MANUAL

BY JEFF KIRKHAM AND JASON ROSS


PREPAREDNESS
For Quarantine, Job Loss or Apocalypse
Avoid the pitfalls. Side-step the Crowds
IN TEN EASY STEPS
By Jeff Kirkham, Green Beret, ret.
& Jason Ross, survival expert.

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money than fire insurance. Common sense preparation can be cheap and easy.

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Preparing for the unexpected can be done without panic and within a reasonable budget. We hope you've enjoyed Black Autumn, and now you'll get cracking on family preparedness.

Join our email list and get our free manual.

President
Partisan

Book Eight of the Black Autumn series
The Last Air Force One Book Two

by Jason Ross & Jeff Kirkham

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jeff Kirkham (right) served almost 29 years as a Green Beret doing multiple classified operations for the US government. He is the proverbial brains behind ReadyMan's survival tools and products and is also the inventor of the Rapid Application Tourniquet (RATS). Jeff has graduated from numerous training schools and accumulated over 8 years "boots on the ground" in combat zones, making him an expert in surviving in war torn environments. He spent the majority of the last decade as a member of a counter terrorist unit, working in combat zones doing a wide variety of operations in support of the global war on terror. Jeff spends his time, tinkering, inventing, writing and helping his immigrant Afghan friends, who fought side by side with Jeff. His true passion is his family and spending quality time with his wife and three children.

Jason Ross (left) has been a hunter, fisherman, shooter and preparedness aficionado since childhood and has spent tens of thousands of hours roughing it in the great American outdoors. He's an accomplished big game hunter, fly fisherman, an Ironman triathlete, SCUBA instructor, and frequent

business mentor to U.S. military veterans. He retired from a career in entrepreneurialism at forty-one years of age after founding and selling several successful business ventures.

After being raised by his dad as a metal fabricator, machinist and mechanic, Jason dedicated twenty years to mastering preparedness tech such as gardening, composting, shooting, small squad tactics, solar power and animal husbandry. Today, Jason splits his time between writing, international humanitarian work and his wife and seven children.

Check out the Readyman lifestyle…join Jeff, Jason and thousands of other readers in their pursuit of preparedness and survival on the ReadyMan Facebook Group. Be sure to sign up here for their newsletter to download your free *Black Autumn* Starter Library, and receive updates, news, and new release information.